



## St. Julie Billiart as a "Friend"

FOUNDER OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR AND SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

# Celebrating 200 years of the Gift of Friendship

by Roseanne Murphy, SNDdeN

One of the loveliest gifts given to the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur is the model of friendship between St. Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon. Born during a time of great hardship because of the French Revolution, the aristocratic woman, Françoise, was drawn to the helpless Julie, at first out of the kindness of her heart when she saw the paralyzed Julie in need. Once again, God revealed to his chosen ones, that what seemed only an act of charity was, in fact, the beginning of a spiritual and very human friendship that grew over the years into a bond of love anchored in the love of God. What Aristotle said of true friendship, that it is willing the good for the other, was, in fact, what brought Julie and Françoise into a mutual search for God's will for them. And God's love, mirrored in this search, brought both women to begin a congregation that eventually touched the shores of five continents.

Julie and Françoise were raised in very different circumstances. Françoise, raised by her grandmother in the ways of the aristocracy, was presented at the court of Louis XVI when she was only eighteen. Julie, a strong and generous girl, assumed much of the work of providing for her family in Cuvilly, a small village in Picardy, after the goods in her father's little shop were stolen, reducing the family to poverty. Before the two women met, Julie was paralyzed, hunted down by the revolutionaries and had to be kept in hiding for fear of her life. Françoise, on

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the other hand, was arrested for being an aristocrat and released only two weeks before she, her father, brother, sister-in-law, and nephew were to be guillotined. By the providence of God, both found refuge at the home of Françoise's brother, on the Rue St. Augustins in Amiens. Both had escaped with their lives and, as circumstances showed, God arranged that they would grow in holiness together to start a work that was meant to help bring back the faith in France.

Julie had a very affectionate heart and did not hesitate to express herself freely. When Françoise had to return to Bourdon to care for her ailing father, Julie wrote upon hearing of his death:

*As (God) has given us the same exclusive wish to seek to glorify him in all things, you must unite yourself with me, my dear child, as far as you can, so that the Good God has some special plan for you... As soon as I heard of your Father's death, I saw you throwing yourself into my arms. This struck my heart with great feeling. It seemed to me that this was to be the moment when the good God would*

*give you to me and me to you in such a strong tie that death alone would separate us. (Letter 29, 1797)*

Such was the beginning of the bond of friendship that carried both of them through good times and bad. They grew to know each others' wishes so well that Julie described their friendship as having "two heads in one bonnet," referring to the habit that they had adopted. Although only a few years younger than Julie, Françoise always considered her friend as her spiritual "mother." But, on the other hand, Julie, who did not enjoy the privilege of the education Françoise was given, easily turned to her friend for advice and counsel. It was Françoise whom Julie sought when she was puzzled as to what decisions she should make regarding new foundations.

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The fact that we have so many letters that passed between the two friends is testimony to their devotion to and trust in each other.

Both women were blessed, indeed, to have had such a beautiful friendship. As sisters of Julie and Françoise, we are also blessed in being surrounded by loving sisters as we continue to search out God's will together.