

SAINT MADELEINE SOPHIE BARAT'S DOCTRINE OF THE INTERIOR LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779-1865), foundress of the Society of the Sacred Heart, was very well known in her lifetime, though she is less so today. At the time of her death, Bishop Parisis of Arras gave it as his opinion that her life had been "as much of an event in our times as were the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic, St. Teresa, and St. Catherine of Siena in other epochs."¹ Shee She was beatified in 1908 and canonized in 1925, and her statue stands in St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Her spiritual message, if it were widely known, would appeal to contemporary people because it is adapted to the life of a busy person who has many responsibilities and is in contact with many people. It does not require that one live in any particular kindsof circumstances nor that one have any special gifts of mind or temperament to follow it as a rule of life. Simply put, the doctrine consists in the understanding that a centering of one's thoughts and feelings under the action of the Holy Spirit will bring one into union with God. Another way to express the same truth is to say that to allow oneself the inner quiet necessary to know Jesus is to know the Father also and be graced by the Spirit. The doctrine of the Gospel of John is the foundation of this insight which St. Madeleine Sophie taught in season and out of season. More important than her words, however, were her deeds which expressed the truth by which she lived.

We know her spirituality through the recollections of those who knew her, through thousands of her extant letters--eleven volumes of them have been published and others are preserved in

manuscript--and through conferences she gave to her community.² Since she wrote neither an autobiography nor any spiritual treatise, and in fact ordered that her personal spiritual notes should be destroyed unread after her death, we are obliged to catch her in action, as it were, and deduce from what she said and did what sort of spiritual experiences she had.

We know from her contemporaries that she gave many hours a day to prayer, despite her heavy obligations as superior general of her congregation, and that she often experienced ecstasies which she tried unsuccessfully to keep hidden from those around her. We know, too, that on one occasion her touch apparently cured a person who was at the point of death. In the process of her canonization, the virtues of charity and humility were especially singled out as characteristic of her. To those who knew her in life, her charm and loveliness stood out in such a way that she seemed to elicit universal affection. Although she could be stern in principle where the glory of God was concerned, in practice she showed immense understanding and patience with the foibles and defects of others. She never lost sight of her own weaknesses and imperfections and, in spite of exercising authority for six decades and meeting with almost uniform success in her undertakings, she appeared always to remain without pride, self-will, or even superficiality vanity.

When one looks at her life as a whole, what is perhaps most striking about it is the extent to which she was led, almost against her will, into the works by which she and her congregation have served the church. Behind the notable accomplishments was the dedication of a woman who never sought worldly success and who believed that the whole supernatural value of the apostolate came from prayer and the practice of interior life. Her own life is the

best and clearest illustration of her doctrine.

EARLY YEARS

Madeleine Sophie Barat was born on December 12, 1779, in Joigny, a little town in Burgundy. Her mother was a rather high-strung, sensitive woman, better educated than her husband, and somewhat more ambitious for her children. The oldest child was a son, Louis, who early showed great promise and was chosen to study for the priesthood. A daughter, Marie Louise, one year younger than Louis, married early and lived to see her large family grow to maturity. Sophie, as the youngest was called at home, was eleven years younger than Louis and very soon gave signs of possessing unusual abilities. She was a delightful child, alert and full of fun, warm and affectionate, and quite capable of making her own decisions. She was remarkably observant and helped her mother in various matters with a perspicacity which led Mme Barat to treat her more as an equal than as a little child. Impressed with her daughter's gifts, Mme Barat consented to allow Louis to become Sophie's tutor and spiritual director. He, in fact, took entire charge of her daily life. This happened in part because he had completed his studies for the priesthood when Sophie was ten years old and because of the revolution was not able to be ordained. He therefore began to teach in the *lycée* in Joigny while waiting to be ordained. It occurred to him that Sophie would profit from following the same curriculum as the boys he taught. Beginning, then, at the age of ten and studying by herself, Sophie took the same courses and examinations as were given in the school, often obtaining better grades than her unseen competitors. She sat for hours every day in her attic room while her friends played outside.

Louis was extremely strict with her and might well have turned her away from learning except that she soon developed a real interest in her studies. She said later in life that at one time she was more of a vergilian than a christian.

When Sophie was not quite thirteen, Louis decided that he wanted to go to Paris to help in the clandestine priestly ministry there. For the next two years, his family heard from him only occasionally. After a time they knew ~~him~~ was in prison and they feared for his life. He sent home pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and before these images Sophie and her parents prayed daily for his safety. This must have made a deep impression on the girl who later was to dedicate her whole life to the glory of the Heart of Jesus. Whatever she ~~learned~~ about the devotion to the Sacred Heart was to remain in her mind and was to overcome to some extent the jansenistic tendencies of the time.

In 1794, after the fall of Robespierre, Louis, now ordained, returned to Joigny for a period of rest. He had escaped the guillotine only because a man he had once known was in charge of writing out the daily list of those to be executed and had omitted ~~his~~'s name time after time--certainly at some risk to himself. Louis was now more than ever eager to devote his life to the service of God, and he hoped that Sophie would be inspired to make some such commitment herself.

On his return home, ~~him~~ realized that Sophie at fifteen had become a very attractive young woman. He saw how much influence she wielded in the household--she had been the main psychological support of her parents, particularly her mother, during Louis's incarceration--and he understood that if he did not regain control over her education, she might never fulfill his spiritual ambitions

for her. Louis did not know what the future might hold for Sophie, but ~~her~~ had been convinced for years that God had some special design on her and he had tried to prepare her for it by the cultivation of her piety and her intellectual abilities. Now he made a proposal to their parents.

He suggested that, regardless of what Sophie herself might want, he should take her with him to Paris where he would direct her in a rigorous course of theological studies. At first her mother resisted the idea, but her ambition for her daughter finally made her give her consent. The father, a quiet man who usually let his wife make the decisions, acquiesced, evidently with the thought that he would not stand in the way of his daughter's possibly brilliant future. Thus it was that Sophie set off for the capital, where she was to spend five years of what amounted to a most severe novitiate under her brother's stern direction.

She and Louis made the trip from Joigny to Paris by river boat, and as they passed Conflans, the site of the Paris diocesan seminary, which she was to purchase years later, she noticed the building and remembered it. It was there seventy years later that she was buried. On that day in 1865, a long line of carriages followed by hundreds of people on foot made up the funeral procession going from Paris to Conflans. When the ceremony ended, the carriages drove off, but there were crowds of poor people left without transportation to the city. Somehow learning about this, the owners of the company that ran the river boats on the Seine ordered that all those people should be given free passage "in the name of Mother Barat." Perhaps it was as well that on the day when Sophie first saw the capital, she did not know that she would become a well-known personage there.

Her studies consisted in the reading of scripture, the fathers

of the church, and the classical works of Western spirituality. She had the penetration of mind to profit from this overwhelming curriculum and acquired deep and broad knowledge of the spiritual life which was to serve her well in the decades during which she was responsible for the development of a new religious congregation. At the time, of course, she had no idea to what use her learning would be put. She was simply obeying what appeared to her to be God's will for her. As one looks back on her life, it seems providential that she should have received such an excellent education both in classics and in spirituality. She also learned several languages, and this was to prove a convenience for her later. What was most beneficial in all her study was the breadth of mind it fostered in her, so that despite the spiritual malformation she received from her brother she arrived at a balanced and loving attitude toward God and other people. In her case God wrote straight with very crooked lines.

Her brother's spiritual direction was marked by strongly jansenistic tendencies. He was her confessor most of the time that they were in Paris, and he used every means to crush her spontaneity, her affection for him, and even her natural curiosity about life outside their little apartment. He taught her to think that her least uncontrolled act--a glance out the window, for instance, during her long hours of study--was displeasing to God, indeed sinful. At last he drove her to the point where she sometimes broke her fast before Mass so that she could refuse to receive communion when he called on her to do so, because she thought that she was guilty of serious sin.

Such a distortion of her conscience caused her immense suffering, but in later years it guaranteed that she would never allow her religious or any other people ~~who~~ whom she was responsible to be

trained in that way. The devotion to the Sacred Heart, which was the main focus of her life, emphasizing as it did the love of Jesus for humankind, acted as an antidote to the jansenism which had such a paralyzing effect on the spiritual lives of many people of that era. Throughout Sophie Barat's life, she struggled to inculcate what one of her religious of a later generation, Janet Erskine Stuart, called "right thoughts of God." If there was one characteristic of the spirituality of the Society of the ~~Sacred~~ Sacred Heart which was to stand out above all others, it was the atmosphere of love and trust in which the members and those they served were to live and work. We may say, then, that Sophie's early experiences of the spiritual life affected her both positively and negatively, so that she was able to form her own balanced judgment about the centrality of the love of Christ.

When Sophie had been with her brother in Paris for about two years, it happened that another priest, a friend of Louis's, came to the city and at Louis's suggestion took over the direction of Sophie's spiritual life. This change brought her a great measure of relief. Then when that priest left Paris a short time later, another, Joseph Varin, came. With his coming, a whole new phase of Sophie's life opened.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY OF THE SACRED HEART

Joseph Varin (1769-1850). after a career as a soldier, had recently joined a group of priests known as the Fathers of the Sacred Heart who were awaiting the time when they could become Jesuits.³ The Society of Jesus had been suppressed in 1773 except in Russia, but many priests had it as their ambition to approximate as closely as possible to the life of the Jesuits until that order should be restored, as they were sure it would be.

order should be restored, as they were sure it would be. Meantime, they endeavored to keep Ignatian principles of spirituality alive. Such a man was Léonor de Tournély (1767-1797), the head of the group of Fathers of the Sacred Heart when Joseph Varin joined them. In a vision, de Tournély became convinced that his priests ought to assist in founding an order of women consecrated to the Sacred Heart. Several attempts to found such a congregation failed, but when de Tournély was dying at the age of thirty, he kept repeating: "It will be. It will be." Joseph Varin, who had been deeply touched by his superior's sanctity, took as part of his own mission the responsibility for founding the order of women. When he met Sophie Barat about three years after de Tournély's death, he decided that she might well be the woman destined to found the new congregation.

Sophie herself had no intention of taking any such initiative. Her desire was to live a contemplative life in Carmel as soon as the convents in France should be reopened. But Louis's training had taught her to be sensitive to the impulse of grace, and when Father Varin argued forcibly that she should cooperate in the establishment of an order consecrated to the glory of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this idea evoked a response, however little she was attracted to it from other points of view.

Since Father de Tournély's death, the Fathers of the Sacred Heart had joined another group of priests with much the same goals--or so they understood.--This group, headed by a man named Paccanari, were called the Fathers of the Faith and were centered in Rome where they had assisted in the establishment of a women's congregation called the *Diletté di Gesù*. Father Varin thought that this might be the fulfillment of Father de Tournély's dream. In 1800, Sophie and her companions began to live religious life according to the rule of the Roman group, although there was little direct contact because

of the political situation. The members of the Paris group made private vows on November 21, 1800, the day the Society of the Sacred Heart traditionally celebrates as its foundation date, but of the community at that time only Sophie remained to be a member and the ~~foundress of the future Society~~ ^{foundress of the future Society}. Soon after that, a request came to take over a boarding school for girls in Amiens. Father Varin thought this might be a suitable beginning for their apostolate and they went there in the fall of 1801 to take charge of what was to become the first school of the Sacred Heart.

Sophie still had no attraction to this type of work, but just at this time she had an experience which convinced her that God was leading her to that kind of activity. One day at prayer she saw a huge monstrance lifted high above the earth and before it hosts of worshippers, and she understood that the educational work that she and her companions would undertake would have as its final purpose the raising up of a host of adorers who would be dedicated to the glory of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁴ This vision remained in her mind throughout her life and helps to explain how a woman as attracted to contemplation as she was came to have such burning enthusiasm for the work of education.

Sophie and her friends set off for Amiens, and there a rather bizarre experience awaited them. Strange as it was, it played a part in their spiritual formation. The first year there was to be a serious test of their faith and obedience, but it was also the last year of Sophie's life in which she would not bear the burden of being a superior, and it was ~~also~~ ^{also} marked by ludicrous episodes provoked by the erratic administration of Mlle Loquet. This woman, then in her early thirties, was pious and well-intentioned but lacking in common sense. Father Varin had named her superior of the little community, of which he himself was the ecclesiastical

superior. Besides Mlle Loquet and Sophie, there were at various times three or four others to carry on all the work of the boarding school of twenty students--the number soon doubled--and the free school enrolling over one hundred and sixty pupils. Sophie, Geneviève Deshayes, and Henriette Grosier, who in the end were the first members of the Society of the Sacred Heart, apparently taught all the classes and oversaw the boarders. They rose at five A.M. and retired at midnight, but their hearts were young and gay and afterwards they looked back on that period as the honeymoon of their religious life.

Since they had no religious habit, Mlle Loquet decided that in addition to their regular clothing they would wear a cook's hat. Thus attired, they escorted the pupils to Mass and Vespers in the parish church and also chased them through the streets when the youngsters ran away from them. Sophie was good at running but could not shout loud enough to call them to order, so Geneviève supplied the lung power. It was Mlle Loquet's idea also to effect a move from one rented house to another on the late afternoon of a major holiday when crowds filled the streets and were much diverted by the sight of these strangely dressed young women carrying their household goods through the town. Even within the boarding school the superior sowed confusion. Her niece, a holy terror, could never be punished, although she broke the china and glassware and made a general nuisance of herself. But it was especially the cook, a lay woman, who had won the superior's heart and it was she who dictated what would be done in the house.

The spiritual direction could hardly have been of better quality than the administration. In her adolescence, Mlle Loquet had written and published some pious fables which she now directed should be read to the community during meals. After Sophie's five

years of theological studies, one can only imagine how these readings must have impressed her.

However, she and Geneviève and Henriette practiced blind obedience and joyously shared their youthful aspirations. Fortunately for the community and the future Society of the Sacred Heart, at the end of a year Father Varin saw the light, Mlle Loquet peacefully withdrew, and Sophie began her life-long career as a superior.

It was one of the *Diletté*, Léopoldine Naudet, who had come from Rome to visit the Amiens community, who pointed out to Father Varin the defects in Mlle Loquet's mode of government and told him that Sophie was the obvious choice to lead the group. He was often away from Amiens at that period and probably did not realize either the difficulties in the house or the young Mother Barat's leadership qualities, though he certainly appreciated the extent to which she lived in union with God in prayer. She often lost awareness of what was going on around her during times of prayer, and only reluctantly could she be persuaded to leave the quiet of contemplation for the active work she was called upon to do. She proved to be an excellent teacher, however, showed much tact in dealing with the various people who came to the convent, and was clearly able to make good judgments on what was best to do in their circumstances. At first Father Varin directed her actions more perhaps than was necessary, but gradually it became customary for her to make decisions and carry them through under his general supervision. He encouraged her to have confidence in the Sacred Heart and to fear nothing. He helped her to acquire trust and courage to meet the demands of the apostolate. Soon the community was to be separated from those in Rome, and shortly after that, with a new community joining them, they became organized as an

independent congregation.

By 1804, it became evident that there was serious trouble affecting the *Dilette* in Rome and Paccanari's actions suggested that he was not mentally sound.⁵ Since communication was still difficult and the messages coming from Rome were disturbing, it seemed best to Joseph Varin to separate the group in Amiens from those in Rome. At that very time, another religious house, the former Visitandine convent in Grenoble which Philippine Duchesne had been striving in vain to reestablish, came to the attention of Father Varin. He visited there and was so impressed with Philippine that he decided immediately to accept her offer to join her community to Mother Barat's. The beautiful scene in which those two holy women met for the first time portended their collaboration in the mission of the Society.⁶

In 1806, it seemed necessary to organize the emergent congregation on a basis that would allow for future growth. In a first chapter--called a General Congregation after the Jesuit custom--Madeleine Sophie Barat was confirmed as superior general for life. Some work was done toward writing a plan of life and arrangements were made for accepting communities and individuals into the little congregation. Nine years later, the Second General Congregation accepted with some emendations the draft of the *Constitutions* presented by Mother Barat and Father Varin. They were approved by the church in 1826, but in 1839 and for a few years thereafter, there was a conflict in the Society about whether the devotion to the Sacred Heart should remain central to its spirituality. Some thought that other emphases would be more helpful, and there was also some effort to change the way of governing to make it more like the Jesuits'. Mother Barat did not approve of the proposed changes but waited while they were tried

out. Soon it became evident that most of the members wanted to return to the original spirit and mode of government.

After that, Mother Barat worked tirelessly to help her religious to live fully according to the spirit of the Society-- that is, to seek union with God by prayer and continual recollection. Of even greater importance than the growth of the membership and the spread of the order to various countries was the deepening of interior life and fidelity to the action of the Holy Spirit. By these means alone could the Society bring people to the knowledge and love of Christ, which was the final purpose of its existence.

MOTHER

MOTHER BARAT'S TEACHING ON INTERIOR LIFE

Mother Barat's spirituality was marked by her own experience of prayer and, as time passed, by her broadening knowledge of human nature. She did not expect the religious or anyone else to live in a sort of dream world, although she ~~did~~ recommend the habit of recollection. She thought that with a little attention and effort one could form this habit and thus act under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She did not suppose that anyone could live always in the awareness of the presence of God but she spoke of the "continually renewed" awareness of that presence. Once when someone wrote her expressing anxiety about her faults, Mother Barat answered: ~~Do~~ not allow yourself to be taken up with these little miseries. They are inherent in human nature. We must struggle against them gently, reject them, and go on our way without interruption."⁷ It took no more than a passing glance at Jesus, as it were, to bring one back to union with him whose heart is the source and symbol of God's love. One can see, then, that Mother Barat's

spirituality was build on a few simple truths, the principal body of them being drawn from her life-long meditation on the Last Discourse.

Apart from that passage and others from scripture, she also found inspiration in some spiritual writers of modern times. She seems to have been influenced by the French School, that of Cardinal de Bérulle (1575-1629) and his followers. They endeavored to present to the clergy of their day an interior type of spirituality which would counterbalance the externalism and formalism which characterized the liturgical practice and personal prayer of so many in the seventeenth century. The emphasis on contemplation of the Holy Trinity and of the Incarnate Word, the importance attached to the interior dispositions in which Jesus performed his earthly acts, the attitude of interior silence and adoration, and the recognition of one's own nothingness before God--all these elements clearly entered into Mother Barat's idea of prayer.⁸

Another influence came from Ignatian spirituality. Throughout her life she preferred that her religious make their retreats under Jesuit directors. The novices were taught Ignatian methods of prayer as an introduction to the spiritual life, and Mother Barat never ceased to praise and thank the Fathers who gave their spiritual service to the Religious of the Sacred Heart in all parts of the world. Many of them were imbued with devotion to the Sacred Heart, particularly as it came from the tradition of St. Margaret Mary. It was a special grace of the Society of Jesus to make that devotion known to the faithful, and their presentation of it to the members of the Society of the Sacred Heart was of primary importance in forming the spirituality of the congregation. It was this devotion which gave its characteristic quality of love and trust to the interior life which Mother Barat advocated.⁹