

An Image Of
Our Lady
Held Near Our Hearts



Since our founding 209 years ago,
every congregational leader has worn this medallion that
once belonged to Françoise.

After a lifetime of pain and poor health, Julie Billiart's days came to an end on April 8, 1816. She died in the middle of Holy Week at the age of 64. Her last words were, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

It was obvious to all that Françoise Blin de Bourdon would be Julie's natural successor. She was known for her sense of serenity, her innate dignity and loving heart. Now called Sister St. Joseph, she was 60 years old when she assumed leadership of the congregation. At the time, there were 58 professed Sisters of Notre Dame and 25 novices in formation, and 12 convent homes.

Sister St. Joseph was especially devoted to the novices. She did not shield them from the fact that life as a Sister of Notre Dame required great sacrifice. Instead, she said sacrifice would bring them happiness if their actions were motivated by a spirit of faith and love of God. And she stressed, "When the heart is in the work, the burden is light."

While her tender and sympathetic side was well known, the times soon proved Sister St. Joseph to be a visionary and gifted leader as well. She set out to build wisely on what she and Julie Billiart had begun together 12 years earlier. A few roadblocks came her way.

At the outset, Sister St. Joseph was faced with attempts to destroy the congregation. The Minister of Education harassed the Sisters with a series of decrees that made it clear the government was trying to rid the country of religious schools.

First, a number of Catholic communities were suppressed. Then all French citizens teaching outside the country were required to return to their country or renounce their citizenship.

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, Sister St. Joseph believed that the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur would flourish. Friends often provided help. Whenever the Minister of Education attempted to interrupt the work of the Sisters, whole parishes and sometimes towns rose up in their defense.

Through it all, Sister St. Joseph remained confident. She continued to welcome young women into the congregation. She built new buildings to accommodate the large number of students wishing to come to the schools, and she opened convents in Belgium in Dinant, Liege, Thuin and Verviers.

She was also instrumental in extending the mission of the congregation into Holland where she expanded Julie's work by training young Dutch women. They went on to form three new congregations: Notre Dame of Amersfoort; Sisters of Jesus, Mary and Joseph of Bois le Duc and the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld.

But perhaps her most important contribution in those early days was a single document. Sister St. Joseph wrote the congregation's first constitution, which ensured the identity, viability and protection of the congregation. When it was formally accepted by the Church, the document paved the way for further expansion locally and abroad. It continues to guide the congregation today, more than 200 years later.

Sister St. Joseph's source of strength came from her complete and total abandonment to God. As she carried out Julie's vision, she counted on and received help from the good God, whom she believed, brought them together and initiated their friendship.

My spirit
rejoices
in God my
savior.

OUR COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Since the founding of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur 209 years ago, the congregation's leader has worn a very special medallion. It is one of three that was struck in 1804 to commemorate vows taken by the first three Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur – Julie Billiart, Françoise Blin de Bourdon and Catherine Duchatel.

One of the original medals was lost when France was bombed during World War II. The medallion that St. Julie wore is in the museum in Namur. The third, which belonged to Françoise, has been worn by each of the 19 Sisters who have led the congregation for the past two centuries.

“*I* thank you from a very affectionate heart.”

Françoise Blin de Bourdon



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