

Leadership Lessons from St. Julie Billiard
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It is a pleasure to be with you to talk about leadership in a Notre Dame context. This afternoon, let us consider a few of the leadership lessons that come to us from the founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame, St. Julie Billiard. I know that St. Julie is a familiar figure to you; you have heard much about her during the time you have worked in a Notre Dame school and certainly at previous education conferences. To those of us who are Sisters of Notre Dame (and I suspect, to others of you as well), she is a beloved, inspiring person.

As Sisters of Notre Dame, we have a tremendous resource from St. Julie, a collection of her letters. St. Julie was a prolific letter writer – I do not doubt that, in this day and age, she would have both a personal webpage and a blog! We know of 454 letters that she wrote over a period of 21 years (from 1795 to 1816); there is reason to believe she wrote other letters that have not been preserved. She wrote to Françoise Blin de Bourdon, her good friend and co-founder of our congregation. She wrote to priests and bishops; she wrote to her sisters, many of whom were quite young and were being asked to take on responsibilities far beyond what they believed capable of doing. She wrote to share news; to get news; to provide spiritual guidance; to offer practical advice.

Some of the most treasured wisdom in Julie's letters has been maintained for Sisters of Notre Dame as "good words," pithy phrases that we repeat often and from which we draw inspiration. This afternoon, I thought we might consider three such "good words" and consider their implications for leaders.

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

First, let's consider St. Julie's insistence that her Institute was founded to serve the poor. I do this with a bit of trepidation, knowing that this has sometimes been used to induce guilt on the part of those who do not work directly with the materially poor. But this is *not* my intention. I believe Julie's expressed preference for the poor is relevant for all of us ... as we shall see from exploring her letters.

In letter 86, written in November of 1808, she states this belief quite firmly in a letter to the superior at Montdidier: "I ask you again to receive only poor little girls who cannot pay at all. Collect as many of them as you can. We exist only for the poor, only for the poor, absolutely only for the poor." We would be hard pressed to find a statement much stronger than that! She goes on to say, "If you have a few who pay, send them away immediately. Thus people will see that you are not giving instruction out of a spirit of self-interest." She reassures the superior who was worried about how to support the sisters in the community, "Let us not worry, my dear daughter, who is going to feed us. Our good Father in heaven will. If what you have in the future is only sufficient for two, the good God will feed the third or put her elsewhere." She encourages the superior to reiterate this desire to serve the poor to the local priest, "If you have the opportunity to see the parish priest of St Pierre, offer him my deep respect. Tell him I want only poor girls in your school, unless his prudence judges some little exception justified. It is for the poor children the good God has sent us to Montdidier."

In hearing this very strong language, we might be tempted to think that the only way to fulfill Julie's desire is to have schools that just enroll poor students. And yet we know that the Sisters of Notre Dame and their lay colleagues teach in a wide variety of

schools, teach students from all income levels. This has been true since at least 1809, when we read in a letter from St. Julie about the foundation at Saint Nicolas, where there was both a school for the poor and a boarding school. Some “gentlemen” as Julie calls them, had withdrawn their support for the foundation because they saw that the Sisters had established the boarding school and assumed the Sisters no longer needed their resources. The “gentlemen” had agreed to provide the buildings rent-free and to offer other assistance. As St. Julie notes, however, “It was for the sake of the poor of St Nicolas that we were running a boarding school, because the sisters were without a penny.” The sisters had established the boarding school not to provide resources for themselves but to enable them to teach the poor.

As an aside, we might note that Julie spent some time trying to convince the “gentlemen of St. Nicolas” to follow through on their promise not to charge the Sisters rent. She writes in letter 118 that she believes she was successful, “Without anything being definitely decided, I have the confidence that we won't be saddled with paying this sum in a year's time. Monsieur Emelaer has almost promised me that.” She does, however, go on to wonder, “but what are men?”!

The mission-based commitment of the Sisters to teaching the poor brought some practical benefits during the time that Napoleon's army occupied Belgium. This was a terrifying time for all Belgian citizens, including the Sisters. Troops roamed the streets, and homes were seized to provide housing for the soldiers. In a February, 1814 letter to the superior at Andenne, Julie writes, “If they happened to give you troops you could see the parish priest and ask his advice as to whether it would not be opportune to go to the new mayor. Tell him you teach all the poor of the town without charging any fees; that

dispensed us in Namur from having any troops in the house. Well, the good God will preserve you from it, if it pleases him. My dear good daughters, we must put our confidence in him alone who is our only support and strength. When there are too many troops in the place do not go to holy Mass. They are said to pursue women. They do not understand the language and that makes it much worse. It is a very difficult time. You must not expose yourselves imprudently. Do not ring your bell at all. For a long time now we have not been ringing for anything, especially when there are many soldiers about. Show yourselves as little as possible; that is prudent. People are forgotten when they are not seen. Don't be seen even by the inhabitants of the town. We are not loved by everybody, as you know.”

As late as December of 1815, in one of her last letters, Julie reiterates the commitment to the poor. Although she now acknowledges that “We are sent for day pupils and for poor children,” she insists that “It is for lack of a settled income from the authorities that we have to take boarders.” As I read her letters, I suspect that if she could, Julie would have had only schools for the poor. Yet she was, if nothing, a realist and knew that it was necessary to teach day pupils in order to fulfill her desire to serve the poor.

So what does this belief that the Sisters of Notre Dame exist “for the poor, only for the poor, absolutely only for the poor” mean for leaders of Notre Dame schools today? It surely means that some will lead schools that teach the poor, only the poor. But it also means, I think, that those who lead schools that enroll students from a range of economic backgrounds will do so “for the sake of the poor.” This will involve charitable activities but also an educational focus, I believe.

Certainly it is important for students from wealthier backgrounds to learn habits of charity, of assisting those with less. I know that many of your schools have done remarkable work in this regard, not only in providing assistance to Notre Dame missions in Africa and Latin America but to a wide range of charitable efforts.

But I think leadership “for the sake of the poor” also means helping students – and faculty and staff – from wealthier backgrounds to begin to look through the eyes of the poor. To make a conscious decision to approach the important issues and decisions of the day from the stance of the poor. To ask how policy initiatives will affect the most vulnerable among us and then to have the courage and resolve to advocate for positions that will benefit the poor. To be willing both to alleviate the results of poverty and to work to eliminate the causes of poverty.

The commitment to the poor is expressed well, and is provided some focus, in one of the calls from our most recent General Chapter: “We are called to listen to the mourning of our fragmented world, of those impoverished by the growing divide between rich and poor and of the sexually exploited, trafficked, marginalized and abused women and children – especially girls. We yearn to deepen our fundamental commitment to stand with our sisters and brothers who live in poverty and accompany them in their struggle.”

This is a call to those of us who are Sisters of Notre Dame, but we extend it to you, our lay colleagues, as well. It will not always be easy to respond to this call. Sometimes it will require self-sacrifice, acting in less than our own best interest. It will take grounding in the Gospels, in a willingness, as Julie says, to “put all our confidence in the good God.”

In Julie's commitment to the poor, we hear echoes of Jesus' commitment. There is not a lot new that can be said about Jesus' love of the poor. We know that He sought out the poor; He taught them; He cast his lot with them; He reminded us that we will find Him in the poor, in the "least" of our sisters and brothers. So we commit ourselves in our day, as Jesus did in his, as Julie did in hers, to stand with the poor, to see the world through their eyes, to exercise leadership on their behalf.

2. Better mistakes than paralysis

A second bit of St. Julie's wisdom that is much beloved by her Sisters is, "Better mistakes than paralysis." Alas, when one reads the letters, it turns out that those exact words do not appear anywhere – but the sentiment certainly does! Julie speaks often about making mistakes or "blunders" as she frequently calls them. In one of her earliest letters, in October, 1795, she writes to Françoise, "You tell me that you have only made silly mistakes. As you know well, my dear good friend, our blunders must not be an obstacle to the work of God's grace in us. I can tell you from my own experience that God often makes use of us after these awkward mistakes." She reiterated this sentiment in another letter, a month later, when she reminded her friend that God "does not want you to take fright if you commit some blunder, but to offer it quite simply to the good God ... God loves a simple heart which does its best." Françoise must have been a bit slow to believe Julie because a year later, Julie writes, "My dear daughter, are you still reproaching yourself for making blunders? Well, there is nothing in this that ought to surprise you. My poor child, you are only too lucky that the good God grants you the grace of noticing them."

With these words, Julie assures her friend it is all right to make mistakes – as long as she learns from them. Mistakes are part of the human condition; God expects them, and so should we! Acknowledging one’s imperfection and forgiving oneself are key to being successful. As leaders, you know well that no human being is perfect! Creating an environment in which your staff can learn from their mistakes can go a long way toward ensuring the overall success of your school.

During the next two decades, Julie would offer similar reassurances to the young sisters who were establishing foundations, leading schools, and managing convents. It became her way of delegating responsibility, of sharing the continued work of founding the congregation. She could not be everywhere at once (although given how much she traveled, it must have seemed to some as though she could!); she could not make every decision herself. She needed her young sisters to believe they could take charge, they could make important decisions. And this meant reassuring them that their blunders were not “terminal,” that indeed mistakes were better than paralysis.

As she wrote in 1810, she wrote to a young superior, “Come on, carry on quite simply! You know that I should prefer to see you make some blunders rather than to know that you are slaves in the holy service of the good God.”

It wasn’t that Julie didn’t want to be kept apprized of what was going on; she did. She wanted to hear about both the accomplishments and the “blunders” of her sisters. As she wrote in 1813, to another superior: “As I told you, there are two establishments to set up immediately. A third one also seems possible, but that is for the beginning of school. As you can see, you will have to get on all by yourself like a grown-up. You must not expect me to tell you, ‘My daughter, do this, do not do that.’ It can’t be like that in your

little community; oh no, no, my good daughter! When you commit fairly great blunders we shall speak about it together. Then we shall correct them with all our hearts; but we shall commit yet another, you and I, as long as we are alive. You must do what I have told you so many times: go on quite straight, quite simply.”

And again to that same superior a month later, “If you waited to base everything on my, your house would go all wrong ... Act, do your best. When you have committed a good dozen blunders, tell me so.”

Julie, like all effective leaders, delegated work to her sisters ... and then let them do it. She didn't ask that they check in about every decision; she didn't try to second guess them. She encouraged them to exercise their best judgment, take appropriate action, and if a “blunder” were made, to admit it and learn from it.

Julie was also not slow to acknowledge her own mistakes to her sisters. In 1809, she wrote to a sister who had been chastising herself for her faults and who expressed fear that she would “commit more of the same faults.” “Yes, yes, my daughter,” wrote Julie, “do not be discouraged about such trifles. I too, my good daughter, shall make many blunders.” And later, in a letter in 1813, “If you do not need the peas I brought you, send them back at the first opportunity. We have none left for planting. Ours were eaten by the animals. That will teach me never to plant them again on a dung heap. You can see that I too make blunders!” We can see that Julie wrote about matters great (establishing schools) and small (peas)!

Julie's willingness to admit her own errors is another hallmark of an effective leader. It must have been a tremendous comfort for her Sisters to know that their leader

didn't believe herself to be perfect, realized that she would – and did – make mistakes and, could, it seems even laugh at herself.

But as a good leader, Julie doesn't let the story end with the blunders. She knows the importance of learning from mistakes. Julie expected her Sisters to use their mistakes to grow spiritually – to avoid “turning inward” and to allow God to work through the mistakes – as well as to become more effective in their responsibilities, to “keep watchful not to commit them again, at least knowingly!” As she wrote in one of her later letters, “We acquire experience with time and through the blunders we all commit every day.”

When we read the Gospels, we don't find that Jesus talks about mistakes or blunders very much, but we do find that he speaks a great deal about forgiveness, about our own need to seek forgiveness as well as to grant forgiveness ... seventy times seven times, if necessary. Through his words but even more so through his actions, he remind us of the great power of forgiveness in our lives ... something that good leaders know well.

3. You must have a manly courage

Finally, St. Julie often exhorted her sisters to behave with “a manly courage” or to exhibit “strong, manly virtues.” In 1807, for example, from St. Nicholas, she wrote, “Indeed, I realize more than ever the need of strong, generous, courageous souls; in a word, manly souls who fear nothing ...” From Amiens, in 1812, she writes of her belief that “The good God has very special plans for our Institute,” which means that her sisters “must respond by constant good and holy behavior, a manly courage.” And, in 1815, she

encourages one of her young superiors, “Above all, show a manly character. The good God asks of you not to be a weak woman; that is not being a Sister of Notre Dame.”

Julie wished her sisters a “manly courage” in any number of circumstances. She noted its necessity if one were to be able, as we just discussed, to acknowledge and learn from mistakes: “It is a great step forward if we are willing to recognize our mistakes with peace and tranquility ... We need manly and solid virtues in our holy state and our holy vocation.”

She also advocated a manly courage in the face of personnel difficulties, as she advised the superior of a difficult young sister in 1811: “You ask me to go and fetch Soeur Firmine immediately. You do not tell me whether she is willing to come. I do not want to bring her here by force. You and I have both done for her all we could, not to say more than was necessary. There has never been a more marked ingratitude than the behavior of this young person, who wants to throw herself into the abyss of all evils. This time you realize what a manly courage is necessary.”

But she also realized the importance of this virtue to face personal challenges, as she noted in one of her very last letters: “At our house we study grammar and spelling every night at recreation. All show a manly courage in learning. Do likewise.”

In the year 2008, the expression “manly courage” sounds a bit peculiar I suspect. Given the prominence of many women and the feminist orientation of many of us, it may even seem a bit sexist. And yet I use it because I believe it gives us insight into Julie’s leadership.

In urging her sisters to embrace a “manly courage,” Julie is not, I think, simply asking them to be brave or fearless. She is encouraging them to engage in unfamiliar

behavior, to behave in ways atypical for young ladies. She is asking them – if you will forgive the jargon – to step out of their comfort zone, to leave behind the familiar and the known, to adopt attitudes and behaviors that will stretch them to grow. And to do this for the sake of a greater good, for the mission of the congregation. (I admit, it’s a pretty feminist interpretation of “manly courage” ... but work with me here!)

I believe that, like St. Julie, effective leaders encourage those in their community to leave behind the comfortable and the familiar, to be confident and unafraid, to develop their talents and abilities for the sake of the greater good.

Can we find any echoes in the Gospels of this feminist interpretation of “manly courage?” I think so. Consider the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Here Jesus certainly left convention beyond and behaved atypically. Not only was a man speaking to a woman, but a Jew was speaking to a Samaritan! The disciples were astonished when they saw it. But once again, Jesus taught, he *led* his disciples well.

For both Jesus and Julie, the ability to be fearless, to exhibit a “many courage” derives from a profound relationship with a loving God. Julie said it well in January of 1815, “My good daughter, you must be armed with a manly courage in your whole behavior. As soon as something seems to worry you too much, cast yourself promptly and humbly, with a boundless confidence, into the care of the most loving Father.” You don’t need me to tell you that being a leader is challenging, that coupled with moments of satisfaction are moments of difficulty and uncertainty. Both Jesus and Julie remind us that leaders don’t have to face these challenges alone, that in our good and loving God, we have a staunch ally and support.

**Leadership Lessons from St. Julie Billiart
Reflection Sheet**

Consider these good words from Saint Julie:

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

Better mistakes than paralysis.

You must have a manly courage.

How might these good words help you to develop your leadership skills?

What priorities or goals might these good words suggest for your ministry?