

MEMOIR OF INSTRUCTION (MI)

INTRODUCTION

The Memoir of Instruction was drawn up around 1681/82 by N. Barré himself. It was published as an appendix to the Paris edition of S.R. (1685) and had its own separate page numbering. It was not in the Rouen edition of S.R.

It gives a short description of the Institute. It was obviously intended for the general public and for anyone who might be interested in entering.

This document places N. Barré's work in the setting of the seventeenth century, and gives reasons for such an undertaking. It also presents the ultimate objective and the means used to attain it : c.f. M.I. 3, 4. In order to accomplish these, the Charitable Mistresses saw the need for a total self giving, apostolic zeal, a deep spirituality and a spirit of inner freedom for the sake of mission, not seeking for anything in return. They experienced freedom with regard to money, people, places, works and all forms of material security and lived in a spirit of availability and total trust in God.

MEMOIR OF INSTRUCTION (MI)

A statement published to highlight the value of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus, established in Paris : first in the parish of St. Jean en Grève (1) and then in St. Nicolas des Champs (2), under the direction of Nicolas Barré, Minim.

1. Lack of education(3) and instruction (4) for girls has always been the reason for most of the disorders which regrettably are to be found even among Christians (5). Indeed such is the case at the present time.

2. Some devout people, moved by this deplorable situation, believed that the best way to remedy it would be to train as charitable mistresses a number of young women who would spread the piety (6) so necessary to all Christians, wherever Divine Providence, through the bishops and parish priests, should be pleased to call them.

3. Thus their aim is to establish the reign of Jesus Christ in all hearts, where the destruction of sin and the tyranny of the devil (7) have previously held sway.

4. The means whereby they seek to achieve this aim are as follows:

a) to run free schools (8) for children, where, by the use of simple methods, they will teach them to read and write, and more especially to come to know, love and serve god from their earliest years so as to live according to Christian principles throughout their lives.

b) To seek out in their own surroundings, older girls who are at risk (9) or who are already in trouble (10), in order to avert the fall of the former and help the latter by their zealous and charitable efforts to extricate themselves from sinful situations and avoid future occasions of sin.

c) To give instructions and talks in the public hall on Sundays and holy days for both older and younger girls on the central mysteries of the Christian faith, the basic principles of Christian morality, the commandments of God and of the Church, the sacred nature of the sacraments as well as the proper way to approach them, particularly Penance : they will

inform them about the number of bad confessions that are made (11). In teaching them to prepare well, they will do so with such simplicity, authority, accuracy and gentleness, that they win the confidence of all the girls who listen to them, from the youngest to the eldest. This is often the way God brings about amazing conversions.

They possess a special grace which enables them to procure the salvation of souls, to preserve the innocence of children, and to win over the parents through their little ones. Gently and gradually they reach the ladies through their maidservants and even convert men through their wives. They save some from danger, others from sin and nearly all from ignorance. Through the same grace they are able to touch the hearts of women who have fallen into grave sin. They help them to examine their consciences, to approach their confessor and to experience sorrow for their sins. Finally, having hidden their sins for so long through that wretched shame, which leads to much irreverence, they will, with great openness, resolve to confess their sins freely.

d) With regard to the older girls and the women who have avoided sin, they will teach them to pray from the heart, that is, to reflect on the mysteries, truths and duties of their religion (12).

5. The principal virtues they will practice are : vocal and mental prayer; frequent reception of the sacraments, unity among themselves; devotion to the Holy Infant Jesus, to His Blessed Mother and to St. Joseph. They will dress simply, be moderate with regard to meals, modest in conversation, reverent in church and show zeal and devotion (13) in everything.

6. a) They will practice charity without looking for anything in return (14). Not only do they commit themselves never to accept anything from those whose children they instruct, in keeping with their rule, but also they are to be content with simple food and maintenance.

b) Moreover, they will be so totally dependent on their superior that they will be willing, at the slightest order, to move to another area without protest, being indifferent as to where they go. They will be ready not only to adapt as well as they possibly can to the needs of the particular parishes, but also to equal the zeal and charity of the parish priests. Several of the latter have spoken and written very positively about them, testifying to the grace they carry with them, to the great good which they accomplish and to the way in which they are esteemed because of the good example they give of humility, modesty and charity.

c) With regard to the future, they will abandon themselves entirely to the providence of God. Those who undertake to maintain them in the various parts of France to which they are sent, are under no obligation to continue providing for them. These young women, forgetful of their own interests, give themselves totally (15) to their mission of proclaiming the Good News, in great serenity of spirit and without anxiety as to what would become of them one day.

d) This spirit of self-giving without being concerned about rewards (16) is considered to be the source of all the graces and blessings which God bestows on the mission of the Charitable Mistresses. It is at the basis of whatever progress they make in helping to bring about the conversion of souls.

e) Moreover they will not manifest any preference with regard to places. With nowhere they can call their own and no fixed abode (17), they go with equal enthusiasm wherever they are needed while always being accountable to their superior.

f) They will also show great detachment with regard to all kinds of people and approach them only as their spiritual needs require. They will not consider the talents or the different dispositions, whether good or bad, of those they instruct, but will work purely and simply for God. Their only desire will be to win glory for him in working for the salvation of souls.

g) Finally, their sole desire will be to carry out promptly and in blind obedience (18) the least order of their superior. That God approves of the Sisters' work is evident from the marks of His extraordinary protection; those whom He already called to Himself from among them have all died in great sanctity and with perceptible signs of having reached eternal happiness (19).

7. The work being done by the Sisters with young women for six years in the Christian and Charitable schools has also been done by school Masters for boys for three years. The most upright and best Masters have been chosen for the young boys. They observe the same Rules as the Sisters : disinterestedness, obedience and charity - for the salvation of souls. Work with the boys began in Paris in the parish of St. Gervais and from there spread to many other provinces, such as : le Poitou, l'Auvergne, la Lorraine, la Normandie, la Picardie, la Champagne, la Bourgogne, le Bourbonnais and le Berri (20).

8. When the Sisters are asked for in any place, the persons concerned are free to dismiss them whenever they wish since they do not arrange an endowment (21) for them. Neither do the Sisters themselves wish to be endowed, which leaves the two parties free, without any commitment on either side.

9. In places where the cost of living is low, forty crowns a year is sufficient for food and maintenance for each sister, otherwise fifty at the most, (22). All that is needed in the places to which they go is a parish priest zealous for the salvation of souls. If he cannot afford to provide for the maintenance and upkeep of one or two sisters (23) and for accommodation for them there may be some devout persons who could help in this matter.

10. A letter written two months previously by M. de la Chetardie, Superior of the seminary at Bourges, to one of his friends engaged in this good work, speaks of it in the following terms : -

«I am fully aware of the marvellous fruits produced by the Institute of the Sisters of Instruction. It seems to me to be one of the greatest graces of this century. Already in different parts of the country several people, inspired by the same spirit, have attempted similar work (24). Although God has granted them success, it must be acknowledged that this Institute is truly a fount of inspiration which others take as their model either by referring to it or adapting to it. « (25)

NOTES

1. This parish no longer exists. It derives its name from the gravel or sand of the river bank because it was near the banks of the Seine.
2. This parish, which was in the same area, also disappeared after the Revolution, due to urbanisation.
3. The promotion of all that will help human beings to grow to full development.
4. Christian formation - knowledge of God so that He may be loved and served.
5. Following the religious struggles of the sixteenth century, parish schools were very disorganised, especially in the country and poorer areas. Schools for girls were very rare in such areas. This, according to N. Barré, was the reason why so many disorders existed among Christians : religious ignorance, immorality, hardships.
6. Expressions of love and respect for God and for all that was regarded as holy.
7. Human beings are destroyed in a world where people do not live as children of God, showing love one for the other. When Jesus Christ is made known and loved, there is a reconstruction of what had been destroyed and people are set free from the evil which can take hold of them..
8. The aim of these schools was the teaching of reading and writing, but above all the Christian formation of youth.
9. Particularly in the moral sense
10. Delinquency and prostitution.
11. ML 4 and 5
12. TS 5, 6, 8; RC 13

13. Devotion : a trusting relationship with God expressed in prayer and in one's day to day living.
14. With complete disinterestedness
15. In the French version there is a figurative expression used here which means giving all the water '†in the well†', or allowing all the oil in the lamp to be used up.
16. Disinterestedness.
17. This is linked with ideas found in RE regarding endowments and the lack of freedom for mission which such endowments would bring.
18. In the tradition of the Church, and as explained by St. Ignatius, blind obedience is a saying '†Yes†' to God's will with all its consequences, even when we do not understand. This '†yes†' is given after a process of dialogue and discernment. It is something active rather than passive.
19. A happy death was regarded as a sign of having lived a good life and of attaining eternal happiness.
20. This paragraph throws some light on the date of MI since the schools began in Paris in 1678.
21. An endowment : a commitment made by rich people under contract during their lifetime or in their will to give funds to maintain a work. For example, if a gift of 1,000 crowns were made to a given Institute to open a school in a certain village or parish, the Institute was bound to open the school and to continue to supply teachers even if the village became depopulated, or if other schools opened in the parish. The Institute would not be free to move to another location.
22. A parish priest usually received 100 crowns north of the Loire and 60 crowns in the south. They had no other income and lived rather poorly. A school master generally got 50 crowns. He would have had to take on other work to help maintain a family.
23. In Paris and Rouen, where there were many schools, the Sisters normally lived in big communities. In many other places they lived in ones, twos or threes c.f. SA. 3; TS 15, 16, 17.
24. Many charitable schools were set up in France in the seventeenth century in response to the Council of Trent
25. It is clear that many Institute s which were started later, referred to N. Barré's writings and the I.J. S, Constitutions, e.g. the Sisters of the Infant Jesus of Lille, nineteenth century, have SR in their foundational documents. The Holy Child Sisters (1846) have the section on zeal which was part of our 1741 Constitutions.