



NICOLAS BARRÉ, Founder of Infant Jesus Sisters

Nicolas Barré was born on 21st October, 1621 in Amiens, France. He was educated by the Jesuits and was an outstanding student. A brilliant future was assured but Nicolas wanted to be a priest. He was attracted to the Minim order, whose motto was “Caritas” and its call to be ‘least of all’. In 1642 Nicolas was ordained a priest and taught theology in Paris as well as continuing his other work as a preacher and confessor. He grew in holiness and helped many people to discover God’s will in their lives. His own spiritual path was not an easy one. He struggled and suffered much, which brought him very close to God and gave him a deep understanding of the human spirit.

In 1659 he became ill and was sent, first to Amiens and then to Rouen, where the monastery was close to where the poorer families lived. Nicolas loved being among these people to whom he ministered as priest, preacher and confessor. He saw that many of them had no knowledge of God and no opportunities for education.

He could see that they were caught in a poverty trap that offered no way out. They were illiterate, spent much of their time in untrained work or roaming the streets. Sometimes they went out to beg or even to steal in an effort to survive.

In 1662, Nicolas began to offer guidance and training to some generous young women, enabling them to teach the children in several locations around the area. These ‘little schools’ proved very successful and popular.

When he saw the dedication of these young women, he invited them to live together as a community, in a spirit of total trust in God’s providential guidance. They said a wholehearted ‘yes’ to this invitation and thus Institute of the Infant Jesus Sisters was born in 1666. Nicolas Barré had the courage and creativity at that time in history to give this community a rule of life that did not include the making of vows. Thus they were free to move and live close to the ordinary people and were not confined by the cloister as religious women were at that time. As time went on, they not only taught in the ‘small schools’, but also in trade schools which would enable younger people to earn their living. They also reached out to

- young women who were struggling with the meaning of their lives
- parents who had limited education and little sense of God
- those who were seeking guidance in deeper prayer, including those who were sick or suffering.

Nicolas was invited to continue similar work in Paris, again with great success. As the needs grew, so did the need for formation and training. A rented house in Rue St. Maur became the centre for the religious formation and professional training of the Sisters. Nicolas Barré’s teachers became well-known for their expertise and their gentle approach. Requests came from different parts of France to set up similar schools, to which Nicolas responded and the Sisters went wherever they were needed. He remained very much in touch with the everyday concerns and needs of the people to whom he ministered and became known throughout France as a gifted and sensitive preacher and spiritual director.

Nicolas Barré’s health, never too robust, was deteriorating and eventually he was confined to the infirmary in his Minim community. He continued to see people who came to visit him and to deal with the concerns of the Institute. With regard to the question of its future, he put all in God’s hands and prepared for death. This came on 31st May 1686.

Three hundred years later, at his beatification on the 7th March 1999, we were reminded of his contemplative and courageous spirit. He was deeply motivated by the extraordinary love of God for all humankind, who desires that all be saved and no one be lost.