



Provincialate : 4A Chestnut Drive, Singapore 679330. Tel: 67602461 website: [www.chij-sisters.org](http://www.chij-sisters.org)

## The ABC of understanding

### IJ Spirituality and IJ Mission

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*Contributed by Sr Georgina IJS and Sr Maria IJS*

## Sr Brigitte's Keynote Address at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian Forum of IJ Sisters and Lay Partners

Asian Forum October 2022

### GREETINGS

It is a chance to meet virtually, thousands of miles apart, as the day begins at home and ends in Japan, in a language that some of us, starting with me, have little or no command of. Behind our screens we are connected to each other, both near and far, because technology gives us both bridges and barriers. So I approach this meeting with a variety of feelings, joy, hope, fear and humility. And I ask God that the small seeds of life that will be shared in these two days among you may bear fruit.

It is a gift that brings us together, a gift that God gave a long time ago to a man, Nicolas Barré, and to a few men and women with him, in a country far from yours and a time far from ours. It could have been locked in a safe, or exhibited in a museum! But this is not the case with God's gifts: when they are received by good hearts, they multiply, spread, adjust to cultures and times and become eternal. This gift was brought to Asia by Mother Mathilde and a few courageous women, and I greet especially our Japanese friends in this year of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of their arrival.

### GATHERED BY A CHARISM

Christians call this kind of gift a charism, a word that comes from the Greek language, which means a gift that God gives to someone to serve others, to realize God's dream: a world of peace and happiness...



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We are gathered because the gift of God to Nicolas Barré, the charism that gave birth to our congregation of the Infant Jesus sisters is not the private property of the sisters. And it has been shared since our beginnings. It was shared by our Founder with men and women of good will. Each of them in their own way, men and women, single and married, were touched by the desire to respond to a call from God to do his work, and thus to live their faith.

I will try to give you a little insight into what it means to share the charism of an Institute, passed on to us by its founder, Blessed Nicolas Barré.

\*What was the expectation, the great need of his time? He was seized by this intuition: "the lack of human and spiritual formation is at the root of the desolate evils that we observe around us". This is the privileged field of action desired by Nicolas Barré empowering those who have been marginalized, excluded, deprived of the knowledge and know-how that humanizes people. We are invited to cultivate this field, to call workers for this field, to train them, to accompany them. \*Many people can appreciate and be nourished by the spirituality of Blessed Nicolas Barré, but welcoming the charism he received is also a way of being and acting in faith.

## **A particular vision**

An aspect of the Gospel: Out of love for humankind, God came Himself as a little child, to be close to the little ones. A particular message of Jesus' life.: He gave himself totally to reveal the love of God his Father to all people, 'especially to the simple and the poor'

## **Through an overall mission**

A spirituality, Abandonment, humility, freedom, Axes of mission Mutual relationships and support  
Everything is linked

### **Spirituality:**

To enter into the reception of a charism with its spirituality is something that makes us grow in all the dimensions of our humanity, and this is not done without 3 renunciations. To be like a pencil in God's hand so that he can use us is also to be sharpened, sliced...

### **Mission**

\*Many people, and may be some of you, can live the same spirituality: absolute trust in God, detachment, humility... But without putting themselves at the service of the same mission

\*Other people can be totally dedicated to the education of people left aside in their society, believers or non-believers, they make us admire them, but without sharing the same spirituality

\*And even, one can live this mission and this spirituality, but without reciprocal and interdependent links with others who also wish to live it.

All this is good and valuable for God!

However, to live our charism is to live a "three-in-one" unity of life. Nicolas Barré said it in his own way when he talked about people, coordinated with each other and "living in union of heart (the link) of spirit (spirituality) and of mission (service to others)"



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## THE NEW IJ PROPOSAL

Collaborators, associates, companions in mission, where does this come from? Three years ago, our international general assembly, which we call a chapter (it happens every six years), officially recognised the possibility of offering lay people the opportunity of having a special link with our Institute in their own way, as lay people. Links already existed, more or less depending on the country, but what is new is that they now have a recognition by our Congregation. We sisters are committed to recognising them and sharing with them what makes us live and vice versa. It is a mutual relationship (each of us gives and receives in the same life).

I will comment on this proposal in two parts:

- The first is a reminder of history,
- The second part is a concrete proposal for today.

## A LONG TRADITION IN THE CHURCH

The sharing of the spirituality and/or mission of religious Institutes with lay people has existed for a long time in the Church, (e.g. the third order of Minim religious, the congregation of Nicolas Barré, but we are not Minim religious and we don't have a third order) 60 years ago a great event of the Catholic Church (the Vatican Council 2) gave back an important role, a great value to all baptized lay people. As baptized we are all equal, priest, religious or lay people. No one vocation is superior to the others. Then the link of lay people with religious congregations has taken on a new impetus in many congregations, and in various forms. For us, if we want to be faithful to the inspiration of Nicolas Barré, we have no choice, it is a requirement, and even stronger in our time because of the urgency of today's needs.

## NICOLAS BARRE CALLS LAY PEOPLE

Faced with human misery, both material, moral and spiritual, he called on men and women of good will to remedy it. How did they do this? By attacking what he considered to be the root of most of the evils and misfortunes of his time: the lack of human and spiritual formation. He saw the human being damaged, wounded, crushed by misery, war, oppression and the exploitation of poor people by political or financial power. He is convinced that the best way to remedy this is to form people, especially children and young people, to help each one to live and grow in his or her dignity as a son or daughter of God. And for that it is urgent to empower those who have been marginalized, excluded, deprived of the knowledge and knowhow that humanize (= make us more human).

## STILL RELEVANT?

Do you think this urgency is still relevant? I do. In the multiplicity of needs of the people of your countries, of your continent, are there not emergencies that touch on the distress of children, youth, in training, education and especially of the youth in search of meaning of life? Today, there are many people left behind in our societies (e.g. access to the Internet, damage and perversion that circulates on social networks, jobless, migrants, exploitation of women, abuses....). It is also a great challenge in the schools, where we, sisters; have not always been able to respond courageously and make the choices that should favour the care of the weakest... Today, as yesterday, God is calling.



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## TRAINING AND ORGANISING

To respond to this, Nicolas Barré sought out competent collaborators, trained them giving them a spirituality that would enable them to make this commitment:

- the heart of their life of faith, of their relationship with God
- the instrument of their conversion, a path to holiness,

This group included

- : • the young women called Charitable Mistresses who were single,
- Men as administrators, and directors (this is linked to the condition of women in 17th century France)
- women associates,

## UNITED AND DIFFERENT

All had different functions and tasks, but ALL carried them out with the same spirit and the same goal. They all formed together the Institute of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Child Jesus, although they lived in different ways, in different states of life: all were at the service of the same mission.

What message, what light can we receive for today, without wanting to copy and paste? What can be your creative fidelity in your context? The answer may be different in its forms, according to your cultures, but in its nature it is identical. From the beginning, Father Barré had the wisdom to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each of them (cf. Fundamental maxims). Today, this will also need to be clarified with experience, and we will seek to do so together in order to maintain common references on the essentials.

## A GLANCE AT OUR HISTORY

Our history confirms the initial intuition Our IJ History took place in France for two centuries, before starting in Spain and Malaysia

- Unlike what happened to other institutes, ours was not destroyed by the French Revolution in 1790. We were an association of Christian women, they dispersed and resumed links after the revolution.
- Around 1870 our superiors began the process of recognition as a religious congregation. Our apostolic spirituality had allowed us to hold out for two centuries (and for women in the context of the time this is a sign that it is solid, deep and strong... The Pope himself recognised this.
- In 1905, when all religious teaching orders were banned in France, some sisters fictitiously took over a lay status in order to resume their mission! This did not cause any problems for many, while other religious congregations preferred to go into exile.
- And much closer to you, in time and space, in Japan, a group of women associates existed after a few years of the sisters' presence, because of the needs of the mission. In the archives in Paris are their rule of life and the instructions for the superiors of the communities that received and accompanied them. Unfortunately, the great fire in Yokohama, where many sisters and associates perished, limits our knowledge about them.

## CONCRETE PROPOSALS FOR TODAY.

What is a little new on our part, the sisters, is to propose to people who are not religious a way of living their baptism in connection with us, to create a mutual more official link, if they wish.

As seen in the Power Point, the link that unites us in the same charism is that of a commitment to a mission, a service to humanity, for which Nicolas Barré has given a spirituality that nourishes, enlightens and inspires the way of living, personally and in all relationships. The two are indivisible. And this is true whether one is religious or lay. Any person attracted by God on this path can ask to join our "spiritual family".



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A charism is not fixed: we are all together engaged in something foundational. Our privileged terrain remains open to all those places where we can allow the weakest, the most fragile, the poorest or the most neglected to live according to their dignity as children of God, which nothing and no one can take away from them. And we believe, as Christians, that everything that makes people grow gives them a divine life. Each country is invited to give shape to this common project of our Institute according to its own culture, in the richness of our diversities.

## THE TWO WAYS

Two ways of living this link with our Institute are offered. We need a common international vocabulary to designate them and so, to understand each other, but each country could find a name that best describes them.

- Collaborators in the mission of Nicolas Barré, I think that in Malaysia you call them companions of the mission
- Associates of our Institute

The word **collaborator** is not the best one, it is ambiguous in many aspects. Other local names have already appeared, such as Companions in Mission in Malaysia

The word **associate** is for us linked to our origins (cf. S.R. 2, 16) the involvement in the group of mistresses of the Charitable Schools was called 'her association'.

## AN ONGOING PROCESS

Journeying on these 2 ways, we should not want to go too fast; let life guide us, let us discern without wanting to go ahead alone, while having enough flexibility to adapt to local realities. However, for both it is desirable to clarify concretely what these links entail on the part of sisters and of laity. It is important that the role, duties, responsibilities of each of you are clear and known to all, sisters and laity, if we are to grow in harmony. We also need to progressively establish a coordinated guidance, first in our countries, then in our continents, then in the whole Institute. The goodwill, the spontaneity of the beginnings, the independent individual initiatives must pass to another stage to ensure sustainability. Without this, the duration of the group living this vocation would risk being compromised. It will be an help, as things that are too vague can lead to confusion, demotivation, or tensions. However, they should not freeze anything in order to let the Holy Spirit act...

**Sisters and lay Nicolas Barré collaborators:** to move forward together in your country you may be need to have a small text that expresses what you are committing yourselves to, a short document that expresses in a flexible and evolving way, some orientations, to contribute to the vitality and purpose of the group you are forming. Let it not be too heavy, it would not be in the Jesus way! Jesus said, 'Blessed are you, Father, for hiding these things from the learned and revealing them to the least of these'. And our Blessed Founder also said this after Him.

Nicolas Barré collaborators, you should not feel that your commitment is an overload, but rather a beautiful path to take, with help to move forward happily along it.

For the associates it is a different status since they are more involved in the life of our Provinces. They have a specific relationship with the whole body, their rights and duties and those of the Province leaders need to be clearly established together. We propose that their membership should have an official character, recognised by the Church in their diocese.



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## **CONCLUSION**

I wish you to continue this reflection together, and my prayer will be with you so that each of you may be happy in your vocation.

As one of our lay partners expressed it :

*This journey with the sisters gives us the feeling of belonging to a kind of family, makes us grow and gives us an impetus, makes us dare to do things that we would never have done without it. It can be said that this communion with the charism of the sisters gives us dynamism in a spiritual family and bonds of heart and mission.*