

Our IJ History since 1662...

The Sisters of the Infant Jesus were founded in Rouen, France by Blessed Nicolas Barré, a Friar Minim in the year 1662. He was from a merchant class family and was sent to study at a school run by the Jesuits where he was recognized as a brilliant student with a promising future. At the age of 19, he entered the Religious Order of the Minims in Amiens attracted by their spirituality, asceticism and an apostolate centred on the conversion of hearts. It was inevitable that as a brilliant student of theology and philosophy, he was later asked to become a teacher of these subjects.

His work in this field and his appointment as librarian in one of the largest spiritual libraries in Paris of this period brought him into contact with many of the learned men of his time. He was also much sought after as a spiritual director and people flocked to seek his advice.

A period of ill health followed and at the age of 36, he was sent to Amiens to recover. While leading a simple life there close to the poor, he gradually recovered. When preaching a retreat in Rouen, Nicolas Barré looked about him and was deeply touched by the misery and moral deprivation in which the majority of children and young people lived in the neighbourhoods. Most of them, especially the girls, were illiterate and even though they had been baptized, they had not been given the rudiments of a Christian education. From their childhood, they worked, were exploited, begged, stole or were given to prostitution. Nicolas Barré having observed their plight, felt moved by compassion and hungered to help. The Text of Jn 3:16 obviously made a deep impression on him : “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life”.

In 1662, Nicolas Barré communicated his concern to some young women and men. He invited them to devote themselves to the service of children and young people. He had concluded that the root cause of the prevalent social condition stemmed from the lack of education. His band of young untrained teachers responded energetically to his call to help teach the children of the poor. In this way, the charitable mistresses known as Mistresses of the Charitable Schools of the Infant Jesus came into being.

In 1666, he invited the young women who were committed to educating the poor in “Little Charitable Schools” to form a community. He saw the need for freedom from any structures which would hinder an effective response to the poor. Therefore, his first sisters, unlike religious of the period, did not live behind high walls, they lived without cloister, took simple promises not vows, dressed in the simple dress of widows of the day and were free to devote their lives to the mission entrusted to them in a spirit of total abandonment to God, not worrying what would be before of them one day. These women he had trained day by day to an apostolic way of life persevered in their ministry with great zeal and humility. By the year of Nicolas Barré’s death in 1686, the “little schools”, had rapidly spread across France.

Father Barré’s great legacy to his sisters was his insistence on their maintaining their freedom, a freedom from constraints that obligate and could hamper their free response to mission and to God’s call. He also

emphasized the need for trust in Divine Providence, a trust which liberates us from securities which may be holding us captive.

In later years, the spiritual strength of the sisters imbibed from the Founder and their fidelity to his vision carried them through the hardship and uncertainties of the revolutionary years in France to emerge even stronger. Two important changes came about in the nineteenth century, the response of the Order to set out on mission to the East in 1852 and the pontifical recognition and approval of the Order in 1866.

[Expansion in South East Asia](#)

Father Jean-Marie Beurel, a priest of Les Mission Etrangères de Paris with the support of the Apostolic Vicar of Malaya, Bishop Bucho, requested the Mother General of the Infant Jesus Sisters to send sisters to Singapore to set up a school for girls. Of the first 5 sisters sent out in 1852, only two survived and these were sent to Penang. Then in 1854, an intrepid band of four sisters led by Mother Mathilde Raclot arrived in Singapore to set up a school for girls. Though tired from traveling and exhausted by the intense tropical heat, they proceeded on arrival to the Cathedral to ask God's special blessing on the mission they were about to undertake. They took up residence in spartan conditions in Caldwell House, which in later years formed part of CHIJ Victoria Street and is today known as CHIJMES.

Their first school for girls and their first home for abandoned children were set up within 10 days of their arrival. Slowly, Asian parents warmed to the sisters' presence and by 1862, the convent enrolment stood at 145. A large proportion of the students were entirely dependent on the sisters for their welfare. Funds to cover costs were generated from the sale of needlework and imported items.

Looking back at the history of this foundation, we cannot but marvel at the courage of Mother Mathilde and her small band of sisters who allowed no obstacle to divert them from their mission of providing an education for girls and that at a period in Singapore's history when many parents were reluctant to give their girls, especially, the chance of being educated. Today, we pay tribute to the deep faith of these founders expressed in their trust in God, their willingness to forge ahead with generosity and energy, convinced of the intrinsic worth of each child as a unique person with God-given talents.

Town Convent, as the school was then known as, grew from strength to strength and in 1903, to the great joy of all, the beautiful Gothic Chapel was completed. It became the focal point of the school complex, a treasured sacred space for students who found peace and harmony within its walls. Many former CHIJ students to this day, recall with deep feeling the influence this building of great beauty had for them.

The value of the religious formation given by this school was best expressed by the late Elizabeth Choy :

“I was very lucky to be able to get into the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus..... We had very good grounding in be[ing] courageous, to trust in God, and God is almighty, all-

powerful. Otherwise without all this background, I'd never been able to go through the Japanese period in the Occupation and the tortures".

The period of World War II tested the faith of the sisters and once again, their capacity to accept uncertainty and hardship bravely, trusting in God. Those hardest hit were those evacuated to Bahau, a virgin jungle settlement in August 1943.

Between 1930 and 1964, nine other CHIJ schools were founded. Each foundation began as a very small school in what was then very often an underdeveloped part of Singapore. It is difficult for us today to recapture the courage and daring of these sister pioneers who each in her own way faced an immense challenge with faith and perseverance.

For the past three hundred years or more we, the Infant Jesus Sisters, are still continuing to find ways of responding creatively and courageously to our original inspiration.

In the course of our history, this had led us to many needy areas in our world wherever human beings are without access to the ordinary means of human development, unable to express themselves, without knowledge of God's love for them or unable to find meaning in life.

From the beginning, involvement in schools was seen as one of the most effective means of helping people develop humanly and spiritually.

These schools, both academic and practical, were always characterized by a concern for those who were disadvantaged in any way.

However, our sisters also sought to respond to people's needs by a variety of other means, such as going out to people in their surroundings, especially young women who had lost direction in their lives, being involved in parish catechesis, reaching out to those whose lives were generally regarded as valueless, including the sick and abandoned, offering retreats and prayer experiences which would help people grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Whatever means were used, emphasis was given to formation of the people who could then continue the work and to whatever would enable each one to become more free and responsible for their future.

[Our story develops](#) : The words "Go out to the whole world...." , echoing in the hearts of many sisters, led them to set out for other shores in a spirit of total trust in the God who says : "I will be with you".

Our sisters are working on every continent.

Today, as a group of women within the Church, being multi-cultural and multi-racial is very enriching for us.

In many of our meetings, East meets West and North and South sit down together.

This gives an opportunity to bear witness to the universality of the Kingdom of God where people of every race, nation and mentality are gathered.

“Union of heart, mind and mission” is not something we want to live only among ourselves but it is something we wish to share with all those who, whatever their faith, are searching to live by the same values in today’s society.