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The life of Blessed Nicolas Barré, founder of the IJ Sisters and the IJ Family



“Lord, I desire only what you desire and as you desire it...”

1621 - 1686

Let us imagine ourselves in Amiens, France, on 21 October 1621. There, a baby boy has just been born to Antoinette and Louis Barré. He will be the eldest and only boy of five children. His parents, no doubt, already look forward to the day when Nicolas will take over and expand the family business. The Barré family had been in haberdashery for several generations. They sold all kind of things: fish, candles, thread, wool, fabric, dyes, seeds and soap. Amiens itself was, in times of peace, a prosperous town handling the cloth trade from England, crops from the North and wine from Bordeaux and Champagne. Being only 110 kilometres from Paris it was a busy crossroads, a centre of communication.

Nicolas grew up in this Christian family and environment under the shadow of the great Amiens Cathedral, a masterpiece of Gothic art, depicting the bible in stone, wood and glass. From the age of about ten, Nicolas was educated by the Jesuits. He showed a great desire to learn and to understand. We are told that he was gifted in the humanities as well as having a lively interest in science and the technology of his time.

These years with the Jesuits were to prepare Nicolas for his later work of training the first ‘charitable teachers’. Here he was formed not only intellectually but also in a solid Christian way of life guided by excellent religious teachers. He saw, being lived out, the ideals of this group of apostolic religious that had finally managed to break with both the monastic and conventual models of religious life. Here he witnessed a deeply contemplative life integrated with action in the world, a Christian life inextricably linked with the social problems of his day. He experienced the fatherly attitude of the teachers who wanted the all-round education of their pupils and saw how the college provided free board for pupils who could not afford to pay. He would have absorbed the missionary urgency that was then sending Jesuits to the ends of the earth to share the Good News of the Gospel with others.

As Nicolas grew up, however, he felt drawn neither to his family business nor to any career in law or science that would have been open to such a brilliant student. Instead he felt called by God to be a priest. He felt drawn to the monastic life. There were several monasteries to choose from in his native town.

Even though educated by the Jesuits, Nicolas chose to join the Minims of St Francis of Paola. He was familiar with their monastery that was situated in a poorer area of the town. Perhaps this choice already showed his awareness of the plight of those who suffered from extreme poverty and its consequences. Most Minim houses were built on the outskirts of towns with a view not only to silence and seclusion but also to being with people who lived on the edge, the unemployed, the factory workers and the peasants. In this way, the Minims



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came to experience first-hand the epidemics, fire and war of mid 17th century France and came to know personally the victims of poverty. The friars rallied both bodily and spiritual energies to come to their assistance. They themselves lived a life of extreme austerity, having a fourth vow of perpetual abstinence from meat and animal products. As well as this penitential lifestyle and struggling against the decadence and permissiveness of their society, the friars rose at midnight to begin their day of work and prayer. The spirit of the Minims, with its emphasis on humility, simplicity, prayer, and especially their motto "Caritas", was to influence the spirituality that Nicolas Barré later offered the "Charitable Teachers", the first Infant Jesus Sisters.

Nicolas joined the Minims in Amiens, when he was 19 years old and made final profession in 1642. He was sent to Paris in 1643. While still a deacon he was asked to teach philosophy and after his ordination he became a theology teacher while continuing his work as a preacher and confessor. He was also appointed director of a famous library at the Minim house in Place Royale, Paris, and where he was to come in contact with many learned and famous people of his time.

After some years living this demanding religious and pastoral life, during which Nicolas witnessed the appalling misery of the people of Paris, he himself fell ill and was sent by the friars, first to Amiens, and then to Rouen where he carried out his apostolate mainly with the Third Order of Minims. It was here that he arranged to meet Marguerite Lestocq and the other young women who were to join him later as the first teachers in the "Little Charitable Schools".

What then brought about this new development in Nicolas Barré's ministry that was to bear such long lasting and wonderful fruit on the five continents?

To understand the movement set in motion by Nicolas Barré and the women who collaborated with him we need to look more closely at the conditions that prevailed in the France of his time. It was the middle of the 17th century. The first half of that century had been a tragic period for France. A country that had just come through the Hundred Years' War saw the outbreak of religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots that were marked by cruel massacres and intense sectarian hatred. On the international front, too, France was involved with ongoing wars that frequently meant the prolonged absence of the men from their families, their farms and businesses.

The economy was mostly agrarian. The land was concentrated largely in the hands of a few who extorted tithes and rents from the majority who were peasants. In the 17th century a number of bad harvests added to the misery, increasing the number of landless and jobless people. Many migrated to the cities where their plight was aggravated. Malnutrition, disease and outbreaks of bubonic plague made this a dark age indeed for people who were poor while massive inequalities existed in the society. There was strong resistance to change. The spiritual misery of the vast majority was just as acute. Priests were badly trained; people's instruction in their faith was sadly neglected. Many, even those well educated, suffered from the influence of the pessimistic Jansenist heresy that taught that God's grace was given only to a few, depriving most people of all hope.

Yet all was not dark. The first half of 17th century France also produced an impressive number of scientists, philosophers as well as religious figures such as Margaret Mary Alacoque, Jane Frances de Chantal, Francis de Sales, Louise de Marillac, Vincent de Paul, Pierre de Bérulle and John Eudes.

The Council of Trent had set in motion a period of intense religious and theological renewal. Religious Orders such as the Carmelites were bringing to France the reform begun in other countries. There was a democratisation of spirituality. Lay people were being called to holiness by people such as Francis de Sales



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who introduced a new form of 'everyday mysticism'. A great number of young girls and married ladies became involved in charitable action during this time.

Some education was available to those who could afford it. Religious Orders such as the Jesuits were providing good secondary education for boys while Religious women such as Mary Ward, the Canonesses of St Augustine and the Ursuline sisters were contributing to the education of girls.

However these opportunities were limited. Most primary schools had been destroyed by war. Lack of funds meant that efforts made by the State and the parishes to provide primary education for poorer children were hopelessly inadequate. Even where schools were available, teachers were not well trained and had low social status. The parents were so busy trying to look after their families that they had little energy left to worry about education. As well as this, most children had to work to help supplement the family income, while education for girls was not considered important.

Such was the political and religious climate when Nicolas Barré was sent to Rouen in 1659. Here too the Minim monastery was close to where the poorer families lived. They were mostly men and women involved in seasonal, manual and unskilled work whose day-to-day life was harsh and precarious. Nicolas Barré could see that they were caught in a poverty trap that offered no way out. Many of the younger people 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. They were the 'street children', the 'delinquents' of their time, who would have been locked up when they got into trouble. Nicolas was keenly aware of people's ignorance of their faith and sense of distance from God. He spent a number of years pondering and praying about this situation, often doing so with other people who were equally concerned.

A turning point: Rouen

While Nicolas pondered and prayed, God was also working in the lives and hearts of other people and was preparing the ground to receive the small seed that was one day to become a mighty tree. It happened like this.

A mission, planned to last for an extended period of time, was held at Sotteville, a town about four kilometres from Rouen. A mission at the time meant that visiting priests would give a series of sermons, visit the families and hear confessions. It coincided with a time of great social problems. A failed harvest had brought hunger and disease and many children had died. As Nicolas went from house to house to invite the families to the mission he could see how the people were suffering. To enable the parents to attend, he decided to invite two young women from other nearby neighbourhoods to come and help with the children. He had already seen how dedicated and skilled they were at this task. One was Françoise Duval, aged 18 years, the other was Marguerite Lestocq, then aged twenty, who was from Amiens and had family links with Nicolas Barré. The year was 1662. For most of the year, they held classes for younger girls in a little room lent to them for that purpose. The classes were held morning and afternoon according to the family circumstances. Several times a week Nicolas Barré would visit them at their work and help them with teaching methods. He taught them how to deal with the children and their mothers. Françoise and Marguerite loved their work and began to feel that they were becoming apostles helping to bring the children to God. The mission was bearing fruit and many adults had conversion experiences. The town was changing. Influential people like Mme de Grainville began to get involved, offering a room in her large house for the classes.

Soon even that was insufficient and another venue was opened in rue des Carmélites. Other women soon joined Françoise and Marguerite. The main purpose of "the little schools" was to teach the children their prayers, to instruct them in their faith and to make known to them the Love of God revealed in Jesus. They were also taught how to read, write and do simple mathematics.



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Nicolas Barré spoke of the value of “instruction and education” and from the beginning he trained the young teachers to respect the uniqueness of each child and to develop each one’s potential. The teachers were to speak in a humble, gentle and simple manner so that even the youngest could understand, and they were to teach only what they themselves had adequately grasped.

Gradually the work of these five young women extended beyond the classrooms to the homes of the children where they offered guidance to the parents. They went to seek out, in their own surroundings, older girls at risk or already in trouble. They taught women and young adults to pray from the heart, reflect on the mysteries of faith and live in the presence of God. Nicolas Barré was very aware of the large number of people who seemed to have lost direction in life and had no knowledge of God. He became convinced that the root of the problem lay in the lack of human and religious education available to young people, **especially girls.**

Community life: 1666

When the schools had been running for about four years, Nicolas Barré shared with the young women ‘the strong urge and inspiration’ he had been feeling for some time now: that if they were happy to do so, the women could live as a community in a spirit of total trust in God’s providential care.

Marguerite tells us how it happened. “ He put the idea before us like this:’ go and have dinner with your sisters who teach at the “Carmelites” and then invite them to come and have dinner with you at the” Penitents” and see if you can live in union with one another’. We did what he asked, through obedience, but quite blindly, not understanding the mystery.” No sooner said than done! A wonderfully human insight that was typical of Nicolas Barré’s wisdom and spirituality. He later explained the kind of life he was offering them and they accepted “wholeheartedly.” The first sister appointed to take charge of the group was Françoise Duval to be succeeded in 1670 by Marguerite Lestocq. Madame de Buc, a lay woman, was named as the first administrator and took responsibility for the material administration of the community.

The spirituality that was to sustain the Institute through the centuries and the characteristics of the way the sisters would “instruct and educate” were already visible in this first group. Most striking was their total dependence on the Providence of God. As early as 1669, the first sisters signed an extraordinary document expressing their total trust ‘in the wise, loving, and all powerful Providence of God’, relying upon it uniquely and always for their maintenance and upkeep.

Nicolas Barré made the virtue of ‘abandonment’ the very foundation of the apostolic spirituality of these first charitable teachers. For them ‘abandonment’ was a strong, positive, active, all-embracing, integrating virtue of total trust in a loving God. It presupposed detachment, disinterestedness, not seeking any rewards for oneself, and a spirit of inner freedom in all areas of their life and work. Though Nicolas Barré was to give this community a simple rule, the women were not bound by any official vows. Hence they were free to move and to live close to the ordinary people, not confined by the cloister as religious women were at that time.

Paris a formation house

Nicolas Barré himself had to be ready to leave behind even this newly planted young shoot when he was called back to Place Royale, Paris, by the Minims in 1675. He was often heard to say that, like the Church itself, what threatened to destroy the Institute in fact made it stronger. So it was with the beginning of the Institute. Nicolas returned to Paris only to discover that the reputation of the movement had gone before him. A powerful and illustrious lady, Marie de Lorraine, invited him to open schools at her expense. Ten schools were opened and later, at her request, a small hospital in Liesse.

As the number of schools grew so did the need for well-trained and well-instructed teachers. Nicolas Barré called Marie Hayer to Paris to be in charge of the community in a rented house in rue St Maur, now known as



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Maison Nicolas Barré, 12, rue de l'Abbé Grégoire. Marie had joined the Institute in 1676 and had already given proof of her ability and goodness. She is remembered now as the first 'superior general' of the Institute. Because they lived in this house in rue St Maur our sisters became known as the Dames de St Maur. This house became a centre for their religious formation and professional training.

A map of Paris dated 1696 shows this building in rue St Maur with many little schools dotted around the city. Trade Schools had been added in which the older girls could learn a trade and be prepared to earn their own living.

Though teachers were still not appreciated or respected in France at that time, the work of these schools was being noticed and supported by some influential people. Through her connections with Marie de Lorraine, Mme de Maintenon brought 'the little schools' to the attention of King Louis XIV. Having experienced poverty in her own childhood, Mme de Maintenon had founded a school for the children of the nobility who had fallen on hard times and for the many children orphaned by the wars of Louis XIV. She requested eight to fifteen teachers from the Institute to help train her own teachers, les Dames de St Louis, in the academy of St Cyr. This request was granted. The Sisters went to St Cyr in August 1686 and stayed there until 1694. Then, all of Nicolas Barré's teachers, except one, returned to their own simple, apostolic lifestyle and the teaching of poorer children. This was a remarkable choice and showed that these women had indeed made their own the spirit of the young Institute.

In the meantime, for historical reasons, some of them were sent to the South of France to teach the Catholic faith to new converts from Protestantism. Certain characteristics of the young teachers were now well known and admired: their excellent educational methods, their love of people living in poverty, their ability to adapt, their flexibility in accommodating girls at the times most convenient for them. They were ready to travel long distances and work wherever they were called, often living away from the community for a long time. They were equally willing to leave a particular region or school when called elsewhere or no longer needed. They were not preoccupied about money or property, trusting in Divine Providence for all their needs. The flexibility of the Institute made it a wonder among women's congregations. A letter written at the time by the Superior of the Seminary in Bourges called the Institute: 'a final work of grace in our time'.

A new development

Nicolas Barré had always insisted that the Institute should not accept 'endowments': a form of monetary patronage that would guarantee the financial security of the Institute. Some of the Institute's lay administrators thought this unrealistic and unwise. Until his death, Nicolas Barré resisted any compromise which could restrain the group's freedom to be true to the founding spirit. Eventually, in 1691, this led to a division between the communities of Rouen and those of Paris. These two branches of the Institute were to develop separately: The Infant Jesus Sisters - Providence of Rouen, became a diocesan institute with a missionary outreach in Madagascar and Central Africa. The Infant Jesus Sisters (Paris based) became an institute of pontifical right with communities in five continents.

Death of Nicolas Barre: 1686

With regard to the future, Nicolas Barre put all in God's hands and prepared for death. This came at about 10.30am on 31 May 1686. Many people mourned his passing, spreading the news: "The holy Minim is dead, the holy Minim is dead" This holiness was recognised by the Church three hundred years later when, at his beatification in Rome, on the 7 March 1999, Pope John Paul II said of him: "Nicolas Barré tirelessly sought to lead both the people he directed and the charitable teachers to the prayer of the heart, inspired by contemplation of the inexpressible mystery of God who out of love became a human being and even a little child. Nicolas Barré, the spiritual master, was both an apostle and a mystic".

Infant Jesus Sisters, Singapore (founded in France, 1662, established in Singapore 1854)



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"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him...may have eternal life." John 3:16

"Our only security is in the excessive love of God."

"Whatever happens, be always at peace and trust in God." – Nicolas Barre