The Vision of Madeleine Sophie Barat 
of the Sacred Heart Educator

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Introduction

At the beginning of a new school year we have a lot on our minds, preoccupations about our own readiness for this fresh start, long lists of last minute preparations, the need to be nested once again in our offices and classrooms before the troops arrive. Much has been accomplished over the summer on this campus, yet there is still so much to do to begin the year...You can feel it in the air.

But for the next hour I hope to shift your focus, just for a little while, away from all you have to do and consider with you who you have to be in order to be true Sacred Heart educators.

As I begin, I want to say a word to the newcomers in this audience: I am going to be talking about Madeleine Sophie Barat, a woman you may not yet have met. We think of her as the founder of this school because she founded a religious order in France in 1800, the Society of the Sacred Heart, and women from this order came to the United States early in the 19th century. They came up the Mississippi and began the Network of Sacred Heart Schools in Missouri and then fanned out to the south, and then the east and the midwest, and then by the end of the 19th century, they made it across the Rocky Mountains to the west coast, first to San Francisco and then, in 1898, to Atherton California. Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat is a quite remarkable woman and I hope you
grow to know and love her as you settle here in a community which is inspired and
callenged by her life and which has embraced her mission of discovering and revealing
God’s love through the work of education.

Sophie, as she was known by family and friends, had a great vision of education
and this vision has been distilled for us in the Goals and Criteria for Sacred Heart Schools
in the United States. You may be less aware that Sophie also had a rigorous and
demanding vision of the **person of a Sacred Heart educator.**

Let me remind all of you that every adult in this community is a Sacred Heart
educator, whether in or out of the classroom, or in the business office or lunch room or
caring for the grounds or promoting equity and justice or performing any of the numerous
other support services needed for the smooth functioning of a school community. How
we relate to one another, how we create a community where everyone can flourish, how
we communicate with respect and kindness, make decisions for the common good, act
with justice…all of it is part of being a Sacred Heart educator, no matter our role. Every
single person in the adult community here is part of the transformative educational
experience of the students entrusted to us.

Two interwoven qualities were equally important for Sophie in the person of a
Sacred Heart educator. In one of her letters she wrote: “The Society has need of **saintes
savantes;** you must become one.” She was looking for educators who were “**wise saints**”
or “**holy scholars.**” Both are fitting translations of her thought. In our context she was
looking for two characteristics: wise and well-trained professionals whatever our
particular role, and men and women who care deeply about our own spiritual formation
and our life with God. In a word, Sophie wanted companions who would carry out her
educational vision to be persons of professional competence and persons committed to the holy life.

Now before you decide that I should actually be giving this talk to the women at Oakwood, let me assure you that each one of you is already engaged in the holy life. All of us are already on amazing spiritual journeys. We may use words like integrity or authenticity or self-transcendence; we may be striving for mindfulness or hoping for transformation. We may not be comfortable using words at all but just have a felt sense of something greater than ourselves drawing us to live a more human and balanced life. All of the ingredients of the holy life are there in our deepest desires and only require of us three things: that we learn to pay attention; that we identify the deepest hungers of our hearts as spiritual longings; and that we open ourselves more fully to the divine.

This morning I want to do two things. First, I want to help you reflect on “holiness” and the holy life to which you are called as Sacred Heart educators. We will consider Saint Madeleine Sophie’s spirituality and the way she trained others in the holy life. Then I’ll talk about Sophie’s insistence that we join professional competence to virtue. Let me assure you, though, as I begin that I do not mean to suggest a hierarchy, first become holy, then attend to competence. In fact, in one of her letters Sophie expresses some frustration about the women who have completed their formation and are beginning their work in the schools: plenty of “saintes,” she says of their piety, but precious few “savantes”! For her, these qualities are inseparable in an educator.

First then, in the language of Goal I, criteria 4, a few words about “opening ourselves to the transforming power of the Spirit of God,” another way of talking about spirituality. “Spirituality” is a word used in a variety of ways: it is a field of study, for
example; or it can be used to distinguish a particular religious tradition such as Christian spirituality or Buddhist spirituality or Jewish spirituality. It can connote a subset within a broader tradition such as Ignatian spirituality or Carmelite spirituality within the broader Christian tradition.

The way I am using the term is this: Spirituality is a way of life, lived in response to the divine. It is a pattern of becoming fully who God longs for us to be. Spirituality is an experience of striving consciously to integrate our life in terms of self-transcendence toward the ultimate values we perceive. It is a way of living where there is coherence between words and deeds, between what we say and how we live. Culture, personal history, a religious tradition, social location, world events, hopes, sufferings, relationships, in fact everything that touches our lives will influence our experience and expression of spirituality.

Such was certainly true for Madeleine Sophie Barat. Sophie was a woman of indomitable faith, courage and intelligence, a woman of deep insight and steely conviction, a woman of profound friendships and the suffering attendant on such relationships, a woman given in every fiber of her being to discovering and making known the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Most important for our topic today, Sophie was a great example of a sainte savant. She was at one and the same time a contemplative, some would say a mystic, and a truly amazing administrator. She bought and sold property, opened scores of foundations, handled enormous finances with facility and skill, negotiated agreements with both church and state, and traveled almost constantly across Europe because, for her, relationships were her preferred mode of governance.
Yet Madeleine Sophie Barat is never remembered as the chief executive officer of a multi-national corporation (although clearly she was!). She is venerated as a woman completely given to God and a woman preoccupied with forming others in prayer and the interior life. And she accomplished this as much by her own faithful life as by her virtually unceasing teachings on the subject. She is revered, too, for the passion with which she promoted the mission of the Society she founded: discovering and revealing the love of God chiefly through the work of education. Sophie demanded professional excellence of her companions, a demand cloathed in gentleness and persuasion, for she believed that anything was possible if encouraged by tender affection. Not surprisingly, tender affection is also a distinguishing mark of her educational philosophy and thus a primary virtue expected of a Sacred Heart educator.

For those of you new to the Sacred Heart Schools let me note briefly the forces that shaped Madeleine Sophie Barat’s inner and outer world and made her the religious leader, the spiritual visionary and the superb educator that she was? Sophie’s family, her locale, the political climate of late eighteenth century France, the Jansenism of the times, her education, her deepest desires, her hopes and fears, the guides she acquired, the recognition of her giftedness by others—all of it shaped her spirituality and her life with God.

Sophie was born in Joigny, France, about ninety miles southeast of Paris in 1779, in the midst of a fire which raged in several homes nearby. This child of fire, premature by several months, was rushed by her brother to the parish church and baptized that very night, so uncertain was her survival. Her health would remain fragile ever after.
She grew up in this fertile region of Burgundy, the daughter of a vintner and barrel maker. It is no surprise that the Gospel verses about the vine and the branches inspired one of her favorite metaphors for union with Christ, for she often accompanied her father in the vineyards and helped gather in the harvest as a young girl. Sophie’s mother was well educated for her day and she welcomed other women for common reading and discussion in her home, Sophie sometimes sitting in. When Sophie was still quite young her mother became very ill. It was, perhaps, a nervous breakdown, though sources are not clear. Sophie picked up bookkeeping and accounting for the family business, an early honing of her considerable administrative gifts.

Sophie received an excellent education under the demanding, often harsh, tutelage of her Jesuit brother Louis, eleven years her senior. This included mathematics, classical and modern languages, theology, patristics and biblical studies – an extraordinary education by any standards even today but especially for a young woman of her time. More importantly, she learned how to use her mind, how to think, how to weigh evidence, how to make choices, all of it essential to a life of discernment. She read the spiritual classics; she studied the Scriptures thoroughly; she had access to the great mystical writers; she was mentored by priests who taught her the spiritual traditions of various schools of spirituality. Such were the chief sources which nurtured her inner world.

Her social location was equally important in her development. The childhood world of Sophie Barat was marked by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 when she was not yet ten years old. Paris imploded in violence and brutality; the very foundations of church and state were destroyed and terror reigned. As an adolescent, Sophie grew up in a world of war, bloodshed, church desecration, divisions and an all-
pervasive fear. Her home, for example, was entered and searched; her brother Louis was imprisoned.

Sophie’s spiritual inheritance is also very important in understanding her life. French spirituality at the end of the 18th century was an amalgam of several spiritual traditions. One strain, drawn especially from the so-called French school expressed the tender love of the Heart of Christ. The other strain was Jansenism which expressed the exact opposite! The Jansenist image of God was harsh, unyielding, demanding and even sometimes capricious—an image diametrically opposed to the God of tender love. All her life Sophie would struggle interiorly to embrace a God of love and tenderness even as she preached this God of love to her followers. Several spiritual guides and several good friendships were instrumental in freeing her from the more constricting teachings of her past and the self doubts and scruples they had fostered in her.

A final influence in Sophie’s early years was the deep attraction she experienced to live a contemplative life. As a young woman Sophie’s heartfelt desire was to become a Carmelite nun and to give her life over completely to solitude and prayer. That intense and unremitting attraction to a God-ward life became the orchestral refrain that suffused her teachings. Even as she founded an order with a vow of education—a decidedly active apostolic work—she believed that no labor could bear any fruit unless rooted in a life profoundly and completely in union with God.

Such were the major influences which shaped Madeleine Sophie Barat and made her a woman of holiness and a remarkable spiritual guide for others. In the busy days ahead, I hope you steal a little quiet time to reflect about the inner and outer forces which have shaped your life. We are, each of us, the product of our environment, our culture,
our educational opportunities, the influence of our family and friends, the choices we have made, the desires nurtured in our hearts by others, the church or synagogue or temple or mosque of our childhood and growing up years, the wise guides who mentor us along the way and the good friends who love us and challenge us to be our best selves. It can be very illuminating to reflect on the influences which are the stuff of our individual salvation histories and which have everything to do with our present ideals, our hopes and fears, the pattern of our relationships, and the passions which drive our lives and make us get out of bed in the morning! This kind of personal reflection will help you identify more concretely the patterns in your own spiritual journey.

Now, having explored the inner and outer forces which shaped Sophie’s spirituality, let’s turn to the way she formed those in her care to become *saintes savantes*. In the simplest terms, she helped others become friends of God by helping them learn to pray.

In those thousands of letters she wrote, I would hazard to state there is not one without some formative spiritual wisdom, especially about prayer, and I can scarcely do her teachings justice. I will limit myself to noting the four distinct features which characterized her wisdom about friendship with God in prayer, namely: simplicity, freedom, discipline, and a deep conviction that prayer is not a series of isolated acts but a way of life.

Sophie’s teachings about prayer are, first of all, utterly simple. Prayer is friendship with God – it is as simple as that. For Sophie, all forms of prayer and every manner of discipline surrounding prayer were simply so many ways of deepening one’s personal relationship with God, of entering into that experience of mutual love and
longing. Prayer is seeking, desire, searching and paying ever greater attention. It is, moreover, a mutual longing, for God has a desire to draw close to each one of us every bit as much as we may desire a deeper experience of God.

And, because prayer is about relationship, how one enters into that relationship is unique to each one of us. Sophie’s teachings on prayer breathe a spirit of great freedom. At one time she wrote to a friend: “What difference does it make how you pray, provided your heart is seeking the one whom you love.” Though she spoke repeatedly of various forms of prayer and ways to prepare, of attentiveness and silence and self-forgetfulness, of methods and practices of mindfulness, all of it was only a means. Sophie was very free, and she freed others, to find the ways they were drawn to God by their particular natures and temperaments. In other words, there is no “correct” way to pray, just as you know from your own experience there is no one “right” way to nurture a friendship or enter into any love relationship. The ways of relating are as varied as we are…so, too, the ways of prayer.

At the same time as Sophie’s teachings exude freedom, she also knew and taught that prayer is a craft requiring discipline and practice, especially for beginners. She distinguished various forms of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, contemplation, mysticism. She advocated a variety of habits which would enhance a life of prayer, among them: learning to pay attention, solitude, silence, time, concrete practices in relationship to feasts and seasons, mantras said during the day, deliberate pauses to reflect on the morning and again late in the day to review the afternoon, and a few days of annual retreat. As for communal and liturgical prayer, she spoke about the sacramental life in interesting, even provocative ways; she truly savored the feasts and
seasons of the church year and she had a profound reverence for joining ourselves to the
death and rising of Jesus in the Eucharist.

If she were alive today I am convinced she would broaden the repertoire of
spiritual practices to include, for example, music and nature, running and biking, yoga
practices, Buddhist mindfulness and loving kindness.

The teachings of other spiritual masters on prayer may also be characterized as
simple, free and disciplined, but there is one aspect of Sophie’s teaching unique to her
school of prayer. Sophie spoke of two inseparable realities, prayer and interior life,
always the two. “Interior life,” or sometimes she called it “interior spirit,” was her way
of speaking of a constant attitude of loving attentiveness which would surround, support
and sustain regular patterns of prayer. Sophie’s lifelong attraction to contemplation was
what led her, so often, to speak of prayer and the interior life in the same breath,
referring to the specific practice of prayer on the one hand and to prayer as a habit of
heart and a way of life on the other. Sophie’s fundamental conviction was this: Prayer,
strictly speaking, flourishes in a person who at the deepest level of his or her being, lives
in union with God and longs for more and more complete union. Interior spirit is a
habitual mindfulness, a deep life of presence, and everything which nurtures the
environment so that a life of union with God is possible. Praying at its heart is loving,
and the one loved is never far from one’s consciousness, even in the midst of a very busy
life. You know this from your experience of deep loving relationships, parents, spouses,
lovers, children, dear friends: the ones you love are seldom far from your consciousness.

In order to prepare saintes savantes, Sophie was not content to form others in a
God-ward life. She also had a passion for the intellectual preparation of competent and
well-trained educators in whatever professional capacity they served. That Sophie’s vision of education was broad, deep and demanding is no surprise, given her own extraordinary education. For her, education was of the whole person, body, mind and spirit. The Goals and Criteria of Sacred Heart Education today are completely consistent with Sophie’s vision – that education inculcate a deep and abiding faith in God, a rigorous intellectual formation, a concern for the other, especially the disadvantaged, a strong instinct for community, and personal growth in freedom. For this work, she insisted that those who formed the students would, themselves, attend to both their professional and personal formation. Again and again she would note the impossibility of communicating attitudes and values to students if these same attitudes and values have not been first appropriated and lived by us.

Virtue alone was not enough in her educators. She was rigorous about intellectual formation as well. Together with Josephine Goetz who would follow her as Superior General in the Society of the Sacred Heart, Sophie developed a program of study called the Juniorate whose goal was described this way by one who went through it: “to make sure that our teaching would preserve its progressiveness, its cultured breadth, its lofty scope, while losing nothing of its orthodoxy or its beautiful uniformity and, concurrently, being perfectly suited to the times.” Every woman who was destined for the classroom first attended the Juniorate to be trained rigorously in the art and craft of education and in the particular discipline she would teach. The Juniorate was also a place where wheat and chaff were separated, where those who had no aptitude for teaching were gently counseled into other work.
There was also for Sophie a clarity about the Society’s mission which is important for us to maintain. She refused foundations when she felt she would have to compromise one or other aspect of her educational goals. She turned down a foundation in Russia, for example, even though all expenses would be paid by the state, since “liberty of teaching would be sacrificed and all religious influence would have to be relinquished.” To a bishop in Detroit who was demanding a work of the Society not approved by our Constitutions, she was quite emphatic that if he persisted in his demands, we would be forced to withdraw from his diocese…though her letter was so completely deferential and charming that he relented and actually purchased the property for our school.

Sophie was also attentive to the need for constant and wise adaptation, and this in two ways: Just after a first house was founded in England she offered this advice about adapting to the culture: “You must make a study of the ways of the country and adopt them as your own….The care of the children must extend to the smallest details…All means of education, intellectual, moral and physical, must be carried to a point of perfection. There will be no success in England unless you unite all these means.” She was perhaps even more attentive to the constant need of adaptation to new needs, new methods, fresh approaches. Sophie wrote: “It shows weakness of mind to hold too much to the beaten track, through fear of innovations. When there is question of souls, what does the pen or pencil, the ruler or the paper matter to God?” “Times change, she said, “and to keep up with them we must change and modify our methods.”

The Plan of Studies of the Society of the Sacred Heart, first formulated in 1806, was rigorously modified at regular intervals to meet changing times and
conditions. It was and has remained open-ended and flexible. The earliest plan of studies included “…a liberal arts education with theology at its core, structured on philosophy, literature, and history, and humanistic in its content with an integration of science and practical skills.” Such was the rigor and breadth of a Sacred Heart education that in the early twentieth century in the United States our curriculum was considered to include two full years of college work.

Many of the examples I have given so far have related to classroom education. Let me add some of the qualities she expected of those in administrative work and those in support positions throughout the school. Sophie had an amazing capacity for communication, long-range planning, financial acumen and excellent patterns of decision making. Today we would call them “best practices.”

Sophie promoted good patterns of communication because she wanted good relationships to characterize us. Here’s a simple example: When a particular superior was being changed, Sophie sent a letter with a detailed communication plan worked out. She spoke of the timing of the announcement within the community, in the school, with the bishop and with the parents, what was to be said and not said, who was to be present, who to withdraw. There was a delicacy in Sophie’s approach to communication. She combined forthrightness, good timing, and respect for all the persons involved. She also waited to speak a difficult word until it was prompted by love and nothing less.

Sophie also insisted on good patterns of decision making. A new foundation was proposed for the city of Derby in England and the RSCJ sent to
negotiate was pressing for a decision, having provided Sophie and her general council with very scant information. Sophie wrote back an extensive list of questions to glean the information needed before she could take a decision about Derby or any foundation for that matter...[and as I read her questions, consider the breadth of her concerns]: does the local bishop concur? will he give us complete liberty for our work? are we responsible for debts previously incurred? what is the amount of debt? what is the cost of making the buildings fit for our works? will the benefactor be able to continue to meet these obligations and will he furnish and equip such an enormous house? is Derby a big town? is it far from the sea? is the cost of living expensive? would it be possible to obtain spiritual help? are the Jesuits able to assist in that respect? is the residence of the bishop far away. Sophie also wanted to know whose advice had been sought and what were their opinions. Only then would she have enough information for her own informed decision.

How much in this hectic and fast-paced world we need this ability to think about an issue with the same breadth and depth before making a decision – particularly when it affects the lives of others.

And once a decision was taken, Sophie mandated the development of a long-range plan. Scarcely had Philippine Duchesne settled in St. Charles in little more than a log cabin than Philippine began writing Sophie about the need for an addition to the house. Sophie was clear with her: ‘Setting out is one thing: you also must know where you are going and what you can do when you get there.’” Sophie insisted that Philippine make a long-range plan so that anything that was
built in St. Charles would be part of a harmonious whole and not have to be torn down to fit some other, later plan.

The number of foundations Sophie established is astonishing, but in the process she labored intensely in trying to keep the Society solvent. She abhorred indebtedness and worked feverishly to keep her head above water, though it seemed a losing battle: “Our debts are frightening and in conscience we cannot increase them without risking bankruptcy,” she said. “I just get out of one pit and fall into another.”

Sophie actually described herself as “tortured” with endless worries over heavy debts and she declared in 1826 that if her general councilors did not adopt stringent measures to reduce these debts, which had increased by 200,000 francs in just the previous year: She said “…I will resign as superior general. I do not wish to see the Society perish through lack of order and because we did not wish to economize. What nights I have spent! What constant worries I carry in my soul.” Needless to say, the council adopted stringent measures. All of us in some measure, but especially administrators and members of the board, need the same financial restraint and fiscal competencies that Sophie displayed to keep her mission flourishing and her institutions afloat.

Finally, Sophie’s administrative practices included a particular pattern for decision-making which I find extremely helpful for today. Sophie described it this way in a letter to a school head: “I watch, I listen, I pray, and I ask others to pray.” Effectively, she was talking about communal discernment, a pattern of seeking as much information as possible, of listening to the wise counsel of others, of taking a decision to
prayer and talking it over with God, and of inviting others into prayerful reflection with her. Furthermore, she absolutely refused be rushed.

When Sophie felt a decision was not weighed appropriately she said so, in no uncertain terms: In about 1815 she wrote to Philippine: “I have taken 24 hours to answer your letter, hoping the Spirit will enlighten my writing and your reception of these lines. I cannot believe that you, a woman of so much intelligence, could come up with such a hare-brained scheme. And now you are so enamored of your idea that you think it is the will of God.”

Searching for the will of God, wanting what God wanted, was Sophie’s life. It’s what drove her to prayer and also gave her a passion to help others develop their own God relationships. It’s what gave her an urgency to educate and by so doing to shape the mind and heart and religious experience of the children entrusted to her care. It’s what helped her to govern her far flung family and to labor on their behalf with wisdom and courage and discerned decision-making for the common good. Above all Sophie’s searching for the will of God and her wanting what God wanted is what shaped her conviction that Sacred Heart educators have to be saintes savantes, well-prepared, competent in our area of expertise, wise, thoughtful and judicious in our choices, loving and forgiving in our relationships, and open to the transforming power of the Spirit of God on our spiritual journeys – journeys which are the project of a whole lifetime.

This life-long journey prompts me to conclude with a great cartoon image. It is a cartoon of a Bedouin family riding across a vast desert on camels. Picture them: the father in front on a very large camel, then the mother on a camel more her size, then three children, graduated in size, the youngest at the tail end. And the youngest calls out in that
whiny voice every parent knows from car trips: “Are we there yet”? And the father turns around in exasperation and says: “No, we’re not there yet. We’re nomads for God’s sake”!