St. Madeleine Sophie's Concept of Justice and Its Meaning for Us Today

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It is not easy to extrapolate from one age to another. Ideas are conceived and put into action in the context of each era according to the circumstances of the time. To ask what St. Madeleine Sophie's views of justice were and to expect them, especially in their application, to be similar to what we stand for today is to be guilty of anachronism. She certainly had a strong concern for justice in her dealings with various kinds of people and she laid down principles of justice according to which the Society's institutions were to be run. As far as the larger social questions were concerned, she accepted the conditions in which she found herself, even while she regretted the inhumanity of man to man; so in some ways the manifestation of her thrust toward justice will differ from what is familiar to us today. To try to force her words to convey what would suit our present conceptions in detail would be untrue to her and not historically valid. We must attempt, then, to grasp what justice stood for in her mind and then see what it would mean to her if she were living today.

Similarly, we must be aware that the Foundress's vision of the Society's apostolate was to some extent confined within the limits of her own experience, though we find that she had a breadth of view and even a vaulting ambition which made her a remarkable leader. She literally wanted to bring all persons to Christ. She put this in terms of the salvation of souls rather than of securing justice for all; but if she had spoken in terms of justice she would have emphasized the right of all to know the message of Christ. Her words were not the ones that come most readily to our lips, but her concern was certainly not less than that of the most committed social activist of the present age.
To consider the relationship between her thought and our perception of the mission of justice today, it seems useful, then, to discuss the following points: her appreciation of the value of the human person, her vision of the Society's apostolate, the changed conditions of certain aspects of our lives as compared to hers, and, as far as our understanding permits it, the estimate we may arrive at concerning the attitudes she would have, if she were our contemporary, to the apostolate defined as a thrust toward justice.

A drama portraying Madeleine Sophie's daily life would bring across the stage a variety of personalities drawn from every walk of life. There would be a series of coachmen, house servants, guards, soldiers, poor old women, bourgeois couples, great ladies and their aristocratic husbands, priests, nuns, school children, young women – in fact, every type of character to be found in the society of her day. One of the salient features of her personality was her ability to have real relationships with these various kinds of people. She knew how to talk to them, she was always concerned about their interests, and she "came through to them," as we would say today, as a real woman who played a genuine role in their lives.

To give a few instances, the history of the Society has a place for Georgino, the coachman, who reformed his life after driving her over many muddy and bumpy miles. We remember also the drunken soldier who escorted her with great pride through the streets of revolutionary Paris. Then there were the poor people to whom she could refuse nothing, even her own warm petticoat, to the distress of the Sister in charge of clothing. There were the coachmen of the wealthy retreatants for whom she provided a priest so that while their employers were praying the servants too might make a retreat. And there was the Bourbon princess whose friendship with Madeleine Sophie brought hope and joy into a life filled with sorrows and disappointments.
The Foundress did not suffer from the inverse snobbery that might have led a less
generous person to give her attention exclusively to the lowly, leaving the rich uncared for. Her
own preferences would have led her to spend her time with the poor and with children, but she
was aware that others had needs and rights and she treated persons according to their own
expectations. One can argue from this that she was humble and charitable – and surely she was to
a heroic degree. What is of particular interest to us here is that she had the quality on which
justice is built: deep respect and appreciation of the individual person regardless of his status,
virtues and talents. Once she remarked in a letter to Philippine Duchesne that it would be easier
to work with the unspoiled children of a more primitive society but that we must value also the
more difficult and seemingly less fruitful apostolate which tries to bring God into the lives of the
worldly, those who have already rejected something of religious values and who may easily be
swept away by the attractions of secular life.

In directing her houses, Mother Barat repeatedly insisted that the headmistresses should
meet in every way the just expectations of the parents, not only in providing good education as
well as proper food and lodging for the children, but also in little matters such as dress and hair
styling which, without inculcating worldliness, could be an important element in the children's
upbringing. She was emphatic about the necessity of paying good wages to the people who
worked in our houses, paying trades people promptly, and caring for the old age of those who
had worked faithfully in the establishments. In other words, she showed a concern for justice
spelled out in terms of the daily reality of other peoples' lives. It was this realism which allowed
her sense of justice to result in concrete and appropriate action. Justice underlay her charity. It
was the clarity of her vision of human worth that made her charity so acceptable to others.
Respect for the person is the very basis of justice. This Madeleine Sophie had to a marked
In Madeleine Sophie's lifetime, the way in which justice was implemented was naturally limited by the conceptions of the time. It was only after her death, in the pontificate of Leo XIII, that the Church first laid down principles of justice to meet the needs arising from industrialized society. Subsequent popes further developed this social theory. In recent years, in *Pacem in Terris* and in the documents of Vatican II, especially the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, we read that justice extends not only to political, social and economic matters, but also to culture. In fact, the emphasis given to the cultural needs of men is a remarkable statement and represents a very great step forward in the thinking of the contemporary Church.

Since it is of profound significance for anyone concerned with the apostolate of education, I shall try to summarize those aspects of it which have particular bearing on the work of the Society. This material is cited with two ideas in view: first, that Madeleine Sophie, if she were living today, would be deeply concerned about the importance of this for the Society's apostolate; and secondly, that this whole matter is viewed by the Church as pertaining strictly to justice, and would be so viewed by her.

The following statements are in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

It is necessary to provide every person with a sufficient abundance of cultural benefits, especially those which constitute so-called basic culture . . . . Energetic efforts must also be expended to make everyone conscious of his right to culture and of the duty to assist others . . . . Opportunities for . . . education can . . . be found in modern society, thanks especially to the increased circulation of books and to the new means of cultural and social communication. All such opportunities can foster a universal culture.
The document goes on to point out that, although it is sometimes difficult to harmonize culture with Christian teaching, "these difficulties do not necessarily harm the life of faith."

After mentioning the various scholarly disciplines – history, philosophy, social and natural sciences – and indicating the ways in which they minister to greater human and spiritual maturity, the document speaks of the contribution that can be made by literature, the arts, and sciences:

Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. For they strive to probe the unique nature of man, his problems, and his experiences as he struggles to know and perfect both himself and the world....Thus they are able to elevate human life as it is expressed in manifold forms, depending on time and place….Furthermore when a man applies himself to the various disciplines of philosophy, of history, and of mathematical and natural science, and when he cultivates the arts, he can do very much to elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, and to the formation of judgments which embody universal values.

The suitability of apostolates should be judged, not on the basis of what was feasible in our Mother Foundress’s day, but on the basis of what is in fact open to our religious more than a century after of her death…. She would rejoice in having the members of the Society to the vast educational enterprise which brings “faceless” multitudes into contact with knowledge, ideas, and attitudes through the huge network of communications that surrounds us all.

We have every reason to think that our Mother Foundress would take very seriously the words of Paul VI:

A burning question of the present day preoccupies us: how can the message of the
Gospel penetrate the world? . . . Dear religious, according to the different ways in which the call of God makes demands upon your spiritual family, you must give full attention to the needs of mankind, their problems and their searchings; you must give witness in their midst, through prayer and action, to the Good News of love, justice, and peace.

Since Christian justice is based on a true understanding of the value of the human person in the eyes of God, an attitude which was eminently present in Madeleine Sophie, it seems clear that the current way of defining the mission of the Society as a thrust toward justice, and all the implications of that definition for the apostolates of the congregation, fall well within the scope of what she hoped for from her little Society, for the sake of spreading the knowledge and love of Christ in the world.

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This selection was abridged for the anthology.