Who was this woman whose impulse precipitated such a movement? In anticipation of its 200th anniversary, the Society of the Sacred Heart commissioned Phil Kilroy, RSCJ, of the Irish Province, an author of numerous articles on religious dissent and women’s history, to write a biography of St. Madeleine Sophie Barat. Unprecedented access to abundant archival material around the world makes this work historically powerful and yet personally alive.

Sister Kilroy defines her writing: “This book is not a history of the Society of the Sacred Heart as such, nor is it a history of the Society of the Sacred Heart’s contribution to education. Biography is an exercise in memory, a way of retrieving the life-story of a person, of telling her story again. By trying to tell some of the truth about a person and her time in history, a biographer rescues both from a stereotyping which threatens to falsify the true person in her time and setting.” Sophie Barat would appreciate such an approach. She once remarked: “A historian should tell the truth.” That is what Phil Kilroy has done.

Madeleine Sophie Barat: 1779-1865
A Life

Phil Kilroy, RSCJ

Prepared by the author in advance of her forthcoming publication of this biography

Madeleine Sophie Barat was a young woman born on the eve of the French Revolution, caught up in the movement to restore and recreate a society devastated by violence and war. Her adolescence was marked by the unrest and turbulence of 1789, of the fall of the monarchy and Reign of Terror, and the memory of these events stayed with Sophie throughout her life. She
lived through the momentous times of the Revolution, the Empire of Napoleon, the restoration of the Bourbons, the July Revolution and the 1848 Revolution.

In the late 18th century, Catholics in France were weighed down, first, by an image of God which was profoundly sinful, and then by a conviction that human beings were incapable of doing any good act. The mediation by the clergy was seen as the only hope of bridging the gap between God and the sinner. It was considered almost impossible to make a good confession and communion, such was the sinfulness of the human being. The impact of this devastating view of human nature meant that the practice of approaching God in sacrament had diminished, especially among the male members of the population. As a child and young adult in Joigny, Sophie imbibed these varying strands of religious experience.

By the time Sophie came to Paris, many women all over France, in a bid to restore the primacy of religion and the place of the church, had initiated small communities focused on social work, mostly in education and health. These projects began in towns, villages, and cities and gradually mushroomed throughout France and Europe into the wider world. Sophie Barat was part of that impulse and energy. Between 1800 and 1820, thirty-five new communities of women, including the Society of the Sacred Heart, were founded in France; and each year, between 1820 and 1880, six new communities were founded. The founders of these communities came from all sections of French society and included fifty-three from the lower bourgeoisie, among them Sophie Barat herself.

Sophie’s leadership of the Society of the Sacred Heart was facilitated by the education she had received as a child and teenager and by her gift for making friendships. In terms of her life’s work, the educational preparation provided by her brother Louis was crucial for Sophie’s position in the Society. It provided her with an ascendancy over her colleagues, most of whom originated from aristocratic and upper bourgeois families in France. In addition, Sophie had a gift for making friendships, which even Louis’s dour influence could not suppress. Sophie exercised her leadership through creating personal relationships with her colleagues, especially in the early years. Surrounded by gifted and energetic women, she consciously used her education and her
capacity to relate to maintain her position as the elected superior general of the communities. Despite this form of leadership, the actual personality of Sophie Barat remained hidden and veiled, since Sophie related to most persons in function of her role, and rarely in a deeply personal way. She was in that role for sixty-three years of life, from 1802 to 1865.

At the time of her death in 1865, Sophie presided over an international community of 3,359 women, who were inspired by a spiritual ideal and offered a service of education in Europe, northern Africa, North and South America. In the course of her life, Sophie bought and sold large schools and properties. She handled intricate finances deftly and made astute deals and decisions. A woman of great entrepreneurial skills, she carried out most of her business affairs through the medium of her letters. These letters are a blend of different subjects, showing Sophie at work, as a leader, friend, guide, and businesswoman. Through her letter-writing, Sophie discovered her personal style of leadership and how to articulate it. She used rhetoric in conversation and letter-writing. This enabled her to overcome obstacles and pursue her goals in a world where the leadership of women was greeted with suspicion and often with outright hostility. Today we can grasp what Sophie Barat was straining toward in her day. But she had not the words, the social constructs, nor the general acknowledgment of women’s roles in today’s world. Without such social confirmation and assurance, Sophie Barat made her way with her colleagues in the Society of the Sacred Heart, with church, and with governments in Paris, in Rome, and throughout the areas where the Society was present during her lifetime.

This was a real achievement because, like all women of her time, Sophie was affected by the low image women had in society generally. The view of women as secondary and inferior to men was deeply imbedded in the consciousness of men and women. Radical thinkers and activists of the Revolution concurred with this judgment. Women, who had hoped for inclusion in the Revolutionary spirit, found that they had been useful only for a time, a common experience of women in any revolutionary period. Negative views towards women were further reinforced by Napoleon, whose Civil Code defined the limited rights and extensive duties of women of the 19th century. It imposed rigid legal subordination on women in the family and in the state.
In this context, Sophie Barat’s leadership of the Society of the Sacred Heart was remarkable, often more by what she did concretely than by her speech and rhetoric. Although Sophie retained the rhetoric of conformity, she moved as she needed to meet the requirements of the moment. In a world where a woman’s powers and skills were not readily recognized and valued by either men or women, Sophie Barat found her way within constrictions to achieve her goals. In that sense, she was the supreme diplomat, forced to use a type of language to make herself understood. She had no script to follow, few models to learn from, and she was often compelled to work alone. She prepared the way for a new space and place for women far beyond her own time.

As a 19th century woman, Sophie Barat found her way out of a private life into a public role with a public profile; and she did this with her colleagues because she had a public service to offer which met a need in society and in the church. However, another inner narrative was taking place at the same time, one that informed the outer and gave the impulse and energy to sustain so much activity. While she was engaged in the founding and consolidation of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Sophie made an inner, spiritual journey in the course of which she continually strove to transform her image of a severe, harsh God into one of warmth and love and vulnerability. Though her exterior success was the focus of her fame in the 19th century and beyond, her inner achievement had greater, long term consequences for the image of the divine, of the holy in our time. Sophie was endowed with a remarkable capacity for human relationships, a gift she used to good effect in her leadership of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Yet it took continual efforts throughout her life to face into her own self-image, her image of God, her shadow self, and the shadow self of her colleagues. On the one hand, the image of God could be cold, empty, harsh, critical and emotionally frozen; on the other, it could be warm, full of energy, gentle, generous, and vulnerable. The effort, never easy, demanded all her courage to trust enough to let go of old centuries, old burdens. In her testament to the Society of the Sacred Heart, read after her death, Sophie Barat admitted she had only realized a part of what she had searched for all her life and that her journey was not over, nor was that of the Society of the Sacred Heart.
Sophie Barat was a deeply religious woman whose life was lived within the basic belief in the existence of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. For her, the Catholic church was the church of Christ. Faithful to its teaching, she was nourished by the sacraments and attentive to the requirements it made of her as superior general of the Society of the Sacred Heart. She loved and practiced many devotions which stemmed from either medieval France or the ultramontane movement of the 19th century. While she did not question any of the fundamental aspects of her faith-world, Sophie’s needs and her own experience of life led her to question, to challenge and change what had been given to her as immutable. But she felt secure in her beliefs and practices, and within those she created new and different spaces for women. She expanded the scope of her own authority and freedom to act which few questioned, especially in the later years of her life when Sophie Barat had already become a legend.

Sophie’s vision was not solely to give young women a good basic education, which would prepare them to be either good wives and mothers, or to live a good Christian life as single women, or to enter a religious congregation; she hoped that the education given in her schools would be profound enough to inspire pupils to rebuild, renew, and transform society, wherever they lived. This was a social program, couched in the language of religion; yet, it had the potential to be highly political. Over the years, her intuition matured, developed, and expanded into seeing education as the means and the way to renew society in its depths. Sophie always returned to that initial hope and desire to heal and renew society in France after the ravages of the Revolution.

In the course of her long life, Sophie Barat was shaped and enriched by the interaction of her personal, inner journey, her network of relationships, and the spiritual ideals which motivated her and her friends. These three elements so informed, modified and transformed her that she emerged from this crucible of formation as a pioneer who, in the company of many gifted companions, had forged her own style of leadership. When she died at the age of eighty-five years, sixty-three of them had been spent in leadership. It was a life lived constantly in the public
eye, in the presence of her colleagues and wider circle of friends, family and business contacts.

Expectations which friends and colleagues placed upon her were often hard to carry out.

Although in her early years she strove to be perfect, Sophie, in later life, recognized that she was not a flawless leader. She recognized some of her limitations and was blind to others. Some things she understood well, others she did not. A product of her time and culture, Sophie was affected by circumstances that influenced the way she was to shape the Society of the Sacred Heart.

Sophie Barat’s impulsive, energetic nature the Society through many critical phases and, in the end, ensured that it would not disintegrate. She kept faith and saw her work through to the end. Yet she functioned best in her role of, and found her relationships through, leadership of the Society of the Sacred Heart. She struggled and came to terms with her own self, and she learned painfully how to stand alone in her own individuality. This was a unique achievement and a task that all face, in any age.

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