Our Early Mothers

*Suzanne Cooke, RSCJ*

Our perceptions of Madeleine Sophie Barat are limited by our making her a saint, that is, someone we think of as distant, “holy,” and unreal. The fact is that she was a real person who lived in real times. She struggled as do we.

Born in 1779, she died in 1865. The historians might well imagine that her life was marked by war and revolution. Madeleine Sophie Barat lived in the era of the French Revolution, the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848. She witnessed the first Opium War and saw the United States blow itself apart in Civil War. In her lifetime, she knew such inventions as the steam engine and the telegraph. Think of the implications!

At the hands of her brother, Sophie received a rigorous education, steeped in the classics of literature, the Fathers of the Church, the wonders of mathematics and science, as well as languages and scripture. Given her own innate spirituality, she developed the habit and discipline of regular prayer. She came to trust her intuitive sense of the Spirit dwelling within her. During her lifetime as Superior General, Madeleine Sophie opened 111 houses. She saw eight closed as a result of war and revolution; two shut down by unfriendly governments, and one break away from the Society. She wrote more than 14,000 letters. She encouraged the Society to move beyond the borders of Europe, in spite of confusing times, to places such as Missouri, Louisiana, Canada, Algiers, Chile, and Cuba. She was a real person whose life has something to say to us.

Reading her letters and hearing various descriptions of St. Madeleine Sophie, one
senses that when she gave herself to God, she gave herself to God’s people totally and
completely. Really, one cannot explain her courage and confidence, her willingness to act,
her tenacity in the face of incredible challenge without understanding her relationship with
Jesus Christ. What drew her to believe, to act, and to love is the compelling power of
Jesus’ person. He was real to her, just as real to her as the person whom anyone most
loves.

Madeleine Sophie experienced that it is the person of Jesus, his fidelity and
constant love, that transforms us if we trust and have confidence in Him. She knew Jesus
loved her and she loved Him simply and straightforwardly. Their communion was the real
power of love. As Maud Monahan, RSCJ, says in her biography of St. Madeleine Sophie:

“The thought of Jesus Christ took so strong a hold upon Madeleine Sophie’s
heart, His image and love were so deeply a reality in her soul that her all absorbing work
never separated her from her God. One cannot overestimate the power that emanated
from the mutual love relationship of Madeleine Sophie Barat and Jesus Christ. Jesus
Christ was her ideal and she loved him with a vehement, great soul love.”

This relationship with Jesus Christ is the central context in which Madeleine
Sophie received and developed her vision of education. She acted with courage and
confidence because she saw herself as God did. She did not place upon herself the self-
limitations that we so often do on ourselves. Knowing that centrality of Madeleine
Sophie’s relationship with Jesus Christ is very important because it explains why Sacred
Heart education is inherently relational. She believed that in and through the act of
teaching one experiences being loved by God and loving God in return. The spirituality of
Sacred Heart education is incarnational, that is to say, at the heart of our work we recognize that Jesus is present in the students and in us. To engage in teaching and learning in our school culture means to touch the face of God, and, more important, it means to reveal God’s face to others. Ours is a sacred imperative to educate the whole child, and through the dynamic of this education we and they come to experience knowing, being loved by, and loving God.

I believe that the culture and mission of Sacred Heart schools has also been influenced by the insights and vision of Madeleine Sophie’s early companions, whom I describe as our early mothers. The dynamic between these women and Mother Barat, coupled with each one’s own relationship with Jesus Christ, affected the development of Sacred Heart education. So, too, the dynamic among them, within the early Society of the Sacred Heart, has influenced both the mission and the culture of Sacred Heart schools today.

**Philippine Duchesne**

In speaking about the early mothers, we naturally begin with Philippine Duchesne. Again, we have lost some of the wonder of Philippine because we have distanced her. We have emphasized her austerity and seriousness. And, indeed, she was serious; yet, like Madeleine Sophie, Philippine was a real person with real hopes and desires. She, too, had received the education of a young man by being educated with her brothers and cousins. Critical thinking developed by a rigorous curriculum, coupled with faith formation, were crucial to Philippine’s own education. Unlike Madeleine Sophie, who had not known a religious until she became one, Philippine had been a novice in the
Visitation Convent before the French Revolution. As a result, she had definitive notions about the style of religious life. As she came to know Madeleine Sophie and learn from her a new way to live as a religious, Philippine found that she had to sacrifice some of what she had initially perceived to be so significant. She came to see that living the life of a religious on the frontier called for different experiences from the life lived as a religious in pre-Revolutionary France. If you want to know what her life really was like, read the journals of pioneer women and then think of Philippine. In the face of these graphic descriptions of life on the frontier, we can begin to imagine the power of her relationship with Jesus Christ and the vision of education that flowed from it.

**Eugénie Audé**

Another early mother of whom we must speak is Eugénie Audé. To her, we owe part of our spiritual inheritance. Raised to be a member of Napoleon’s court, Eugénie Audé was a diplomat, a politician, and a linguist. Compelled by her image of Jesus Christ, she came to reject the life of the court in favor of a life devoted to understanding her relationship with Jesus Christ and his people. Once she met Madeleine Sophie Barat, Eugénie Audé decided that whatever the future held, membership to this fledgling group of women held the key. Intelligent, well-educated, she valued critical thinking and lively faith. Chosen by Mother Barat to accompany Philippine to America, Eugénie Audé was to found Grand Coteau and St. Michael’s in Louisiana. Her dealings with the plantation owners and their daughters forced her to think and re-think the essentials of education at the Sacred Heart.
Aloysia Hardey

Then consider Mother Aloysia Hardey. While Philippine brought Sacred Heart education from France to America, it was Mother Hardey who saw that it move from the South to the Northeast and later to Canada and Cuba and beyond. Mother Hardey proved to be the ideal New York politician. Greatly admired by Archbishop Hughes, she contributed to the building of Catholic New York at a time of persecution, suffering, expansion and confusion. Madeleine Sophie’s confidence in her young American daughter led to such requests as to ask this Southerner to travel incognito across enemy lines during the Civil War to bring consolation and money to the houses in Missouri.

Like the focus of the other early mothers, Mother Hardey’s was constant – God and children. It was her critical and imaginative thinking, coupled with her strong faith in Jesus Christ, that enabled Mother Hardey to act with such courage and confidence.

All of the early mothers believed passionately in the importance of educating girls and young women. They shared the conviction we have today, that the quality of the future will be significantly influenced by people who are well-educated, who think critically, who act with courage and compassion, and whose faith is informed and lively. Such people secure the future because they radiate hope. Given our early mothers’ moment in history, their perception of women’s role was more conventional than is held today. Nonetheless, most would agree with them that girls and women attend to the quality of their relationships and, in this act, hold a significant role for the building of a just society.

The mission of Sacred Heart education has been, and continues to be, to educate to
an informed, active faith, critical thinking, and service to others. The aim has been constant: ensure that students gain self-knowledge, energy and purpose so that they may become people of conviction and compassion. Like St. Madeleine Sophie, we know that self-esteem must be nurtured in individuals if they are to develop into thoughtful, compassionate people. Sacred Heart education is about both the soul and the intellect.

Our education of the whole child intends to address both the heart and the mind. We enable young people to become successful because they come to know who they are and how their God loves them. Our students’ future success evolves from their conviction to treat others with dignity and respect because each person is known and valued by God.

To educate the whole child for us means to form conscience and develop faith-filled hearts.

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