

Historical Perspective: Sacred Heart Education

Conference on Gender, Network of Sacred Heart Schools, March 15-18, 2012

Frances Gimber, RSCJ

I have been asked to situate our discussions of the past few days in the context of the history of Sacred Heart education. As you know, if you have been at a Sacred Heart school for any length of time, our educational goals and practice are rooted in the educational charism of Madeleine Sophie Barat, a woman of 19th century France whose own education was unique for her time and place. She was home-schooled – to use a contemporary term – but not by parents, by her brother Louis, eleven years her senior, who taught in the town’s minor seminary. In an era when schooling for girls was lacking, he saw in Sophie potential for a deeper and fuller education than could be provided by her mother and the parish priest. The story goes that he gave her at home the same lessons he was offering to his boys at the seminary. In fact, years later there were old men in the town of Joigny who remembered Louis and his teaching. They recalled that he would come into class and tell them that his little sister had beaten them again in competitive examinations. Louis is often vilified for being too hard on Sophie, and in his moral and spiritual training he was. But I have always maintained that it is due to Louis that Sophie had the experience of being educated; and because she had had that experience, as an adult she believed in the possibility of education for other women. The first thing she did as a school founder was to seek the advice of experienced priest-educators as to curriculum and pedagogy; she wanted solid intellectual formation for the young women who would come to her schools. It is not surprising that her schools were for girls; in that era women educated girls and men, boys; it was a given. But it is her motivation that is important. It was nothing less than the transformation of society! According one of our French RSCJ educators, Madeleine Sophie Barat’s originality in her time and place was to

stake her enterprise on the educability of girls. To found schools was not original in the 19th century. Schools that taught reading and writing, sewing and housekeeping, that developed character and the virtues of family life, were the chief work of women’s religious congregations. Madeleine Sophie was much more innovative... She envisioned the reinvigoration of the task usually assigned to men in society [in her day], the task of renewal in depth of the social order. Her goal was to educate girls so that they could have a transforming influence in society – that is what was original. That is the meaning of a sentence she wrote in 1840 [with forty years of experience behind her] “Salvation will come about through women...transformed by faith women can become men.” In other words, women must make themselves capable of doing what men do: act on society so as to transform it. That was the bold vision of Madeleine Sophie Barat which gave rise to a complete and coherent system of pedagogical thought responding to this lofty design.

The thread of this aim in various colors has run through the fabric of Sacred Heart education since the beginning. It has marked the emphasis on the “whole child,” the belief that the development of the person has to come first. Religious of the Sacred Heart were trained to give their students means of developing their aptitudes and talents and of internalizing the guidelines necessary to social development. This aim has influenced the equally strong emphasis on solid studies. Sophie wanted a strong curriculum, and for that she insisted on well-prepared teachers. She said “If we grow weak in the science of teaching, we will provide arms to be used against us.” She wanted the nuns who taught to be learned women. She once wrote to a friend about novices in another country, “There are many holy people among them, but learned, not one! We need holy, learned women [*saintes savantes*], so do hurry up and become one.”

Of course, the research that we have now on differences between boys and girls in learning styles, in brain development and pedagogical requirements at different ages was not available to Madeleine Sophie. Nevertheless she shows consciousness of gender differences. At a certain moment in our Society's history when there was a movement to draw closer in our governmental practice to a Jesuit model, she insisted that women cannot be governed as men are; her mode of governing was through her relationships with the members, rather than through rules and edicts. Did not Carol Gilligan teach us that a generation ago? Later in the same tradition Mother Stuart made the same assertion: "We are women and we must govern in a woman's way."

Madeleine Sophie's writings – mostly letters – show however that she made use of the research that *was* available; she once wrote that she had read everything important about education in her day; and when she grew older and busier, she charged the woman who would succeed her, Josephine Gøtz, with keeping her up-to-date on educational theory and practice. This Mother Gøtz saw it as her task to solidify to some extent and to systemize the educational practice of the first half century. She kept au courant of the growing demands of the university, the educational authority in France at the time. There was a constant concern with concessions to the "tendencies of the century" versus "compromising our principles." Yet adaptation where possible was encouraged: the Plan of Studies that provided the blueprint for the schools was subject to regular review. Mother Gøtz introduced elements of logic and philosophy into the programs of the higher classes. And she insisted that when nuns were not sufficiently trained in a particular subject a lay person should be employed, lest "outdated methods and incomplete instruction would constitute an injustice to the students."

Madeleine Sophie's successors as heads of the Society were not all intellectuals as was Mother Gøtz, but each in her own way showed concern for the level of instruction in the schools and for the training of the nuns as teachers. When we come to Mother Janet Erskine Stuart, who governed from 1911-14, we have a true intellectual. She was widely read; she was aware of educational currents of her time and in her book *The Education of Catholic Girls* she undertook to offer wise, shrewd and occasionally humorous reflections on various aspects of a school program. This book is so widely quoted in our schools that I am sure you would recognize some of her sayings. In connection with the topic of this conference I would like to relate to you two anecdotes about her. By the time the superior general Mother Digby and Mother Stuart, both English women, visited the U.S. in 1898, we had boys in the school in Chicago. Mother Stuart wrote home to England:

Yesterday our Mother had the nicest reception she has yet had. This house is almost the only one, I think, that has a day school for boys... These heroes were drawn up in a semi-circle, heels *tightly* together, heads erect, very tight knickerbockers... spotless kid gloves. The one who had to make the speech was very self-possessed, one of those nice... heads that no school is ever without... [He] spoke with all the finished articulation of a boy that knows the value of consonants, and with great deliberation... he had so much sang-froid that he went back to pick up an important gesture that he had forgotten. It was meant to be a wave of the open hand, but space was limited and he hit the boy next to him on the waistcoat, with a ... loss of oratorical effect. Then each boy came up to offer the flowers, looking at our Mother General with a respect and awe that I hardly thought young America was capable of.

You see a real appreciation of these little fellows in her description. On another occasion someone asked Mother Stuart for what category of persons she would like to be a spiritual director. Everyone thought she

would say nuns. Instead she said, “I think small boys.” So those of you who teach small boys have a special patron in her.

By the time Mother Stuart was governing the Society, it had spread to all five continents, so the earlier versions of the Plan of Studies had to be modified to a large extent. Local language, the literature and history of the country replaced the focus on France, but the philosophical and literary emphasis remained. In the middle of the last century a significant revision of the Society’s way of describing its education took place: a new document called *The Spirit and Plan of Studies* was elaborated. It distinguished between instruction and education. It emphasized that instruction in various academic disciplines could differ widely, but all instruction was at the service of education, defined as development of the whole person. The whole child, boy or girl, and the attention given to the individual child were at the center. It follows, therefore, that research of the kind we have been hearing about supports Sacred Heart education in its essence, in fact is necessary if our education is to remain true to itself. This principle has found its way into the most recent statement of the meaning of education at the Sacred Heart, the *Goals and Criteria*. All the criteria under Goal II, but especially the first one, emphasize the importance of research and reflection on our practice. As we gather for conferences of this kind, as we reflect all year on how we are meeting the needs of our students, boys or girls, we are in a direct line with Madeleine Sophie Barat’s design.