

To Coesfeld from Julie

Some notes on what the Coesfeld congregation has received that traces back to St. Julie Billiart and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

The first thirty years

The Holy Rule:

Approbation

1. The Amersfoort Sisters brought with them to Coesfeld their Rule approved in 1850, which was a modified version of the 1836 Namur Rule
2. A modified form of this 1850 Rule was approved by the Holy See for the Amersfoort congregation in 1855. That is the Rule with which the Coesfeld sisters began their life as an independent congregation. According to the records in our archives (*Jahrbuch*) the changes from the 1850 version were those approved or required by the Holy See. No comparison has ever been made of the Coesfeld version of 1855 and the Amersfoort version of 1855. At the present time some of our Sisters, notably Sister Mary Joell and Sister Maria Mechtilde, are engaged in trying to make this comparison.

Some key provisions and how they suited the needs/spirit of the Coesfeld project

1. The Rule calls for central government. The Superior General is superior of all sisters, regardless of diocese. She corresponds with dispersed members and makes an annual visitation of all the houses. This pattern is common today, but in Julie's day it was unusual for women's communities. Julie's insistence on this pattern of government was one of the reasons for which she was expelled from the Diocese of Amiens. This is a major difference from the Rule St. Peter Fourier had to accept in order for the Canonesses to be approved by the Holy See in the seventeenth century. This provision for central, trans-diocesan government initially caused some misunderstanding because the diocesan authorities in Münster had assumed that the new congregation in Coesfeld would be diocesan, not part of a larger congregation. Indeed, the clash in interests was a factor in the split in 1855.
2. There is no "enclosure," meaning that the sisters are not cloistered. They may live in small communities in towns and villages apart from the central house. This is another major difference from earlier Rules for women religious. The Canonesses in Münster all had to live in that one location and teach the girls who came to them. This would not have worked for the diocese in 1850 because they wanted to have sisters teaching all over.
3. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These are basic to any religious institute. But it is useful to note here that many female teachers trained in the Overberg tradition already lived in a way that had some of the characteristics of religious consecration. As Hilligonde did, they chose not to marry but to devote themselves to teaching. Some of them still wore the old Westphalian teachers' uniform on the job as they had during teacher training (black dress and cape, white bonnet). It was understood that material possessions did not make a person happy or worth something before God; even those who were well off were expected not to make a display of wealth so that even the poorest parents could feel at ease approaching them. In the German family of the day there was a strong sense of parental authority moderated by love. The response

to ecclesial authority that was inculcated was more about loving and faithful cooperation than about fearful subservience. Life under vow for the Coesfeld candidates would not have been as much of a culture shock as it would be for many people today.

4. There is no distinction of choir or lay sisters– all are equal as they live in community. This would have seemed normal to the Coesfeld candidates because they had been raised to regard people as equal before God. It was traditional for the daughters of even wealthy landowners to learn how to do all aspects of household maintenance and for the wives of the rich farmers to work along with the hired help in the house. In later years as the urban middle and professional class developed, that mentality changed in Germany.
5. There is a commitment to Christian education, with a special emphasis on the teaching of poor and needy children, particularly girls. This provision supported Hilligonde’s intentions and those of the diocese. When Father Elting reported to Hilligonde that the Amersfoort sisters were devoted to the education of poor children, she was very happy to hear that they had the same goals as she. Overberg’s whole work as educational reformer had been to address the needs of the common people. He taught his teachers to see in the poor a special likeness to Christ. He made special efforts to get families to send their girls to school and also to recruit and train female lay teachers.
6. The congregation chooses Mary for its Mother and special patroness. There was a very strong Marian devotion among the people. Hilligonde was also glad to hear from Father Elting that the congregation under consideration to come to Coesfeld put its educational work under the patronage of Our Lady.
7. The virtues of simplicity, obedience and charity are singled out as part of the characteristic spirit of the congregation. The spirit of obedience and of simplicity understood as simple life style have already been mentioned as part of the upbringing of the first Coesfeld sisters. Simplicity understood as God-centeredness, as seeking God in all things and above all things, was already an integral part of their spiritual formation as a result of Overberg’s catechesis and teacher formation. It was part of a deep prayer life. Likewise, charity understood as an intentional and active love for all people was a central theme of the catechesis/ faith formation they had been raised with and which they were themselves expected to teach. In Hilligonde’s own life and in the spiritual approach of Overberg, God is known as providential and caring love.

The Sound Traditions

Beyond the written Rule, every congregation has certain practices, customs, devotions, etc. that serve to express and convey its characteristic spirit and spirituality. Although there has been a good bit of research into the transmittal of the Rule from Julie to her own congregation of Namur and then to Amersfoort and on to Coesfeld, very little has been done to document the transfer of what are called the “sound traditions.” The Amersfoort archivist does not think that they ever had Namur’s Manual of Prayer although preliminary comparisons show some similarities across the three congregations. We don’t know what kind of instructions the Amersfoort sisters gave to the Coesfeld candidates nor even what Mother Marie Joseph gave her own sisters by way of spiritual instruction. And no comparison has been made with the spiritual themes handed on in the Namur congregation during those years.

There are, however, some traditions that we know were carried over during these early years that would have been new to the Coesfeld candidates or already familiar to them:

1. Traditional practices of religious institutes that had their origin in monastic communities, such as times of silence, daily schedules, common prayer, ways of making up for faults, penitential practices, the habit. Some of this would have been new to the Coesfeld candidates, but aspects like the daily schedule, common prayer, mental prayer, daily Mass, were like what they experienced at the teacher training institute in Münster. Also the Amersfoort habit was like the teacher uniform with the addition of a veil, white collar, crucifix and rosary.
2. Devotion to the Sacred Heart was strong in the Namur congregation and was found also in Amersfoort. It was one of the things that Hilligonde was pleased to hear about from Father Elting. But the kind of Sacred Heart devotion that one finds in Coesfeld has the strong flavor of the Rhineland mystics, with the basic image that of going into the Heart of Jesus pierced on the Cross rather than the reparation theme of Paray-le-Monial. When Sister Maria Ignatia spoke to the novices about the Sacred Heart it was in terms of the writings of St. Gertrude. And the little drawings of the Heart that she used to make for them (one of which can be seen in the hand copied Coesfeld hymnal) there are seven drops of blood coming from the wound in the heart, just as there are seven drops of blood coming from the wound on Christ's side on the Coesfeld crucifix. That is not a characteristic found in other representations of the Heart. So even when there is a common devotion or prayer tradition, the Coesfeld sisters seem to have put their own stamp on it, drawn from their own religious and spiritual background

After 1880

After the Coesfeld sisters learned about their connection to Namur and therefore to Mother Julie, a process began of consciously learning about her and trying to incorporate her way of seeing and relating to God. Mother Maria Chrysostoma, in a move that was unlike anything that the Amersfoort congregation experienced, began to portray the Coesfeld congregation as a "branch" of Namur with Julie as foundress of both. Sister Maria Aloysia was referred to as foundress of the "German branch" of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Increasingly, and in a particular way by mid to late twentieth century in connection with her canonization, the primary reference point for the Coesfeld sisters had become Julie Billiart. As the Coesfeld sisters learned about Mother Julie from various biographies, and then in the 1970s through her translated letters, certain themes of her spirituality became clear and especially dear to them

More recent study has shown these themes to be very similar to those that the first Coesfeld sisters already had as part of their spiritual heritage. The relationship between their spiritual inheritance from Julie and that from Münster and Overberg appears to be more one of compatibility or complementarity between the two rather than dependence of the German upon the French, the home grown upon the imported. This deeper and more nuanced understanding of Sister Maria Aloysia and of the congregation's roots in its "home" diocese has grown out of work on a new history of the congregation.

Such study complies with Vatican II's mandate to religious congregations that they examine their beginnings and try to identify their original character, spirit, and mission.

Here are some of the special themes of Julie's spirituality and how they relate to the original Coesfeld tradition:

1. The Goodness of God as a central theme– the Coesfeld sisters had been brought up to know that God is good (both in their religious formation as Catholics in the Münster Diocese and in their training in the Overberg tradition). They knew that “God is good”. However, God's goodness as a central theme in our Coesfeld tradition is something we picked up after we began to learn about Julie and consciously tried to model ourselves on her. This is basically a twentieth century phenomenon.
2. Trust in God – already a part of their spiritual upbringing as centered in God's providential, caring love. Julie writes about God's providence, but Providence is more central a theme in the Coesfeld congregation, something that Namur sisters have noticed.
3. God alone, simplicity, God centeredness, expressed in the image of the sunflower. As stated above, this was a major element of the spiritual formation the Coesfeld sisters had received through catechesis and teacher training.
4. The Cross - From the time of her vision in 1792 in which she learned that she would found a congregation marked by the Cross, this is a very important theme in Julie's spirituality. It was also a very important element in the traditional spirituality of Westphalia and the Rhineland as embodied in the *gabelkreuz* (the forked cross) that represents the Tree of Life. The Coesfeld crucifix is only one of the more famous examples of this kind of cross. This theme of God taking on our suffering in redeeming love was a response to the horrors of the fourteenth century (Black Death, wars, famine, etc.) and has continued to be relevant to the people of that area as is evidenced by the continuing devotion to the Coesfeld Way of the Cross. During the same century there appeared early images of the Pieta that are still very sensitive and touching. Devotion to the Mother of Sorrows was very strong in the early days of the congregation.
5. Missionary spirit – Julie told her sisters to “have a heart as wide as the world.” Already as a teenager, Hilligonde had wanted to go to the foreign missions. The Diocese of Münster was at her time and since been very active in mission work. The sisters who came here in 1874 called themselves “missionaries.” Reading this in Julie is something Coesfeld sisters would resonate with.

Summary

Why the Coesfeld Sisters call Julie Billiart their Spiritual Mother

1. The pattern or form of religious life they have traces back to her through the Rule, which provided the framework within which the Coesfeld sisters could live out their original spirituality and mission in the context of religious consecration. She cannot be called “foundress” because she was not involved in actual the foundation of the Coesfeld congregation.

2. Certain “sound traditions” the Coesfeld sisters have as a religious congregation trace back to Julie. Both the Rule and the traditions make them part of her spiritual family.
3. The story of her life and her spiritual teaching have enriched the sisters’ relationship with God and supported the spiritual inheritance coming to them from Sister Maria Aloysia and the first Coesfeld sisters.
4. The adoption during the twentieth century of God’s goodness as a central theme in their spirituality and of their charism, joining it to the foundational Coesfeld emphasis on God’s providential care, grew out of a conscious intention to emulate her spiritual focus.

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