

Notre Dame Educators of Britain

14 September 2007

## **THE RIVERS OF LIFE RUN THROUGH IT**

It is a pleasure to be with you today to talk about the great heritage that is yours as leaders of Notre Dame Institutions. It is my privilege to talk with you about your Notre Dame Heritage. Your leadership roles impact the quality of education in your institutions and as such, you are not only heirs but also trustees of the Notre Dame Tradition. You are taking a moment today to ponder the deep purposes of your schools. Mission and Spirituality are like rivers flowing beneath the daily events at your institutions.

Rivers have been important places in our history. Our foundress, St. Julie Billiart was paralyzed for two-thirds of her life and shortly after her cure she helped with a mission at Saint Valery on the River Somme. It is here that she first saw the sea and we conjecture that the experience may have given her the vision for the Sisters of Notre Dame to go throughout the world. She wrote to her good friend and our co-foundress, "My heart and my soul are at rest in my God through all the fogs of the Somme." The river provided vision but also confusion as it sometimes does for us.

After our foundation in Amiens, we moved to Namur because of a difference with the Bishop about the nature of the Congregation. Namur is at the confluence of the Meuse and Sambre Rivers. I invite you to think of a river as a symbol of our Notre Dame Tradition. It is a long and winding river that keeps flowing and we are invited to tap into its life-giving waters to animate our educational efforts, nourish our spirits and moisten the dry places of our lives. This river exists on five continents and in 20

countries. . It gives refreshment in the desert regions of Africa and restores life to the great Amazon forest. It provides refreshment for the poor of Peru and the orphans of Zimbabwe. It flows abundantly and deeply through Great Britain, United States, Belgium and Italy. It has established magnificent schools in Japan. During these past two hundred years, over fifteen thousand sisters of Notre Dame have carried the waters of its life around the world. This pulsing river is a river of memory, of vision, of inspiration, of simplicity, of responsibility, of internationality, of leadership, and of Wisdom. The rivers that run through your cities will each symbolize one aspect of this tradition but they each hold the entire heritage.

### **The River Mersey is a River of Memory**

The River Mersey is a river of memory because it is a tributary of the great Notre Dame River which began over 200 years ago in Amiens, France when two women dedicated their lives to provide education in the ravaged infrastructure of Church and State in post-revolutionary France. The Mersey has been a River of Notre Dame since 1852 when the Mount Pleasant Notre Dame Training College was established in Liverpool. This Notre Dame River has been flowing abundantly for 75% of the history of the entire Congregation. It has deepened and widened through the presence of the many Sisters who served the poor in inner city Liverpool for several generations and remains flourishing in the Notre Dame Institutions of Everton Valley and St. Julie's Woolton.

The injunction, "Remember," is one of the most frequent exhortations in the Bible, for it is remembering the works of God that we are able to define who we are and

see the world around us with God's eyes. It is in remembering the history of our schools that we are able to define who we are in this continuing work of education which St. Julie called the "Greatest work on earth." Our remembrance is more than calling to mind the events and people who shaped our institutions. We remember with the underlying understanding of the Jewish concept of *ziccaron*: the notion of remembering in such a way as to make a past event a present experience in order to re-actualize what has already taken place.

Those who "make memorial" not only call the past into the present, but in doing so are affected by that past in such a way that their future is also changed. What we are engaged in today is transformative memory that calls forth a commitment to the future. The way we remember our past has the power to change the future. We could even say that we have come together to remember the future. In holding fast to the memory of our tradition, we are led to the River of Vision.

### **The River Clyde is a River of Vision**

The Notre Dame River is a river of vision because it not only holds the institutional memory but contains the vision that inspired all Sisters of Notre Dame. The River Clyde embodies the vision of the early Sisters of Notre Dame who established Teacher Training and outstanding schools in Glasgow and Dumbarton. The mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame is the mission of Jesus which is to bring about the reign of God. However, while that mission is the purpose of all religious Congregations, the spirit or charism of each is unique to the foundress of a Congregation. Thus in carrying out the mission, the members of each congregation manifest the particular charism of the foundress/founder. Our foundress, St. Julie Billiart, had a profound appreciation of the

Goodness of God. It was a gift (charism) of insight that permanently changed her vision in life. The realization of God's Goodness everywhere apparent overwhelmed her to such depth that she directed the whole of her life so that others might also become aware of God's Goodness. We describe it in the first article of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame, "The Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was founded by Marie Rose Julie Billiard, a woman filled with love for God and God's people. She responded to the call to commit her life completely to God and to spread everywhere the Gospel message that God is indeed good." That impulse is carried by all Sisters of Notre Dame who are motivated by the same energy. We say in our Constitutions, "Our common aim is to express in our time, as Julie did in hers, that God is good." All those in mission in the spirit of Notre Dame are called to proclaim the good news of God's goodness through word and action.

The Notre Dame charism calls the person to proclaim the good news of God's goodness through word and action which means that one is both the messenger and the message. The message is proclaimed and lived in such a way that the messenger is recognized by certain characteristics which not only identify the messenger but proclaim the message. Many of these characteristics mark Notre Dame Education. They are from the river of inspiration.

### **The River Tamar is a River of Inspiration**

The River Tamar inspires by the presence of Notre Dame in the only non-private Catholic School in a large area. It is the messenger of the Goodness of God. The characteristics of the messenger are from a particular spirituality. It is a river of inspiration because it offers a spirituality to express in our time that God is indeed good.

Spirituality is an elusive word which is at times vague and imprecise. There are almost as many definitions of it as there are people. Experiential definitions seem to work better than conceptual definitions. It is what a people mean when they talk about what gives them energy; how they want to feel connected or how they seek to belong to something greater than themselves. We recognize they seek what is authentic and genuine, something personal and intimate. They long for water that satisfies their thirst. It is a deep need, a cry from the heart. The water that they choose to drink to satisfy their deepest longing is their spirituality.

The Sisters of Notre Dame have a spirituality which is rooted in the conviction that God is good. St. Julie's most frequent saying was, "Ah! Qu'il est bon le bon Dieu!" "How good is the Good God!" Notre Dame Spirituality, a vision of the world as a manifestation of God's goodness emerged through this lens. I will briefly describe a few characteristics of this spirituality in order to explain some of the currents in our river.

One outstanding characteristic is trust. A firm belief that God is good engenders an equally strong trust in God and in God's creation. It is an optimistic stance on life. Julie's trust was steadfast and true, tested by trials and suffering but she never doubted that it all had significant meaning. "God knows how to make everything turn to the good of those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God."

Trust in God's goodness is accompanied by a liberty of spirit which allows one to be daring and courageous, open and flexible yet serene in the face of criticism and opposition. All of these qualities speak of a life focused on God's goodness. The ability to keep the focus leads us to the River of Simplicity.

### **The River Yare is a River of Simplicity**

Like Plymouth, Norwich is remote and has a resulting openness to students who were not Catholic. In order to retain its identity, it kept a focus on its mission or in the language of Notre Dame Spirituality, it had the characteristic of simplicity. It is also near the Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham which is England's Nazareth. We associate the quality of simplicity with Nazareth, not only for the uncomplicated environment but for the laser-like focus of the life of Mary, the one who "pondered all these things in her heart."

Simplicity is a primary characteristic of the Sisters of Notre Dame. It is a single-heartedness that is a response of the whole person to God experienced as good. Like the sun that draws the sunflower in its direction, so God draws Sisters of Notre Dame in a response that is total, direct and uncomplicated. It is our great legacy and perhaps our greatest challenge because simplicity is one and undivided. We cannot have it in one aspect of our lives and lack it in another. As the whole sunflower is turned to the sun, so the Notre Dame Charism calls us to focus wholeheartedly on God. A person possessing simplicity can respond to new calls from God and moves with God as God continues to be revealed in the contemporary reality.

The ability to live a life of complete trust in God and total focus on God's action in all of life calls for a life of prayer and reflection. Our spirituality is centered in and flows from a tradition of contemplative action. "As the quality of our life response flows from our personal and communal prayer and asceticism, so the authenticity of our prayer flows from our life response" (#46). The mutuality of life lived and prayer is the radical meaning of simplicity. There are no separate compartments to life, it is one. St. Julie had

a marvellous expression for this unity which she called 'rapture of action.' True education requires reflective pondering into the deepest longing and desires of our being.

The spirit of trust and simplicity in Julie produced a manifest joy. Joy is so much a characteristic of Notre Dame Spirituality that at one point St. Julie declared that a particular convent was no longer a Notre Dame community because there was no joy there. The joy of Notre Dame Spirituality is the Christian joy rooted in the Paschal mystery. We are called to embrace the cross, trusting in the mystery of life and death which lies at the center of Christian faith. Embrace of the inevitable suffering of the human condition is integral to the embrace of God's action in all of life. Julie had a direct and simple way of explaining this when she says, "God knows how to make everything turn to the good for those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God." Such a stance in life leads one to the river of responsibility.

### **The River Don is a River of Responsibility**

The river that nourishes is also a river of responsibility. The rivers in our big cities such as the River Don in Sheffield remind us of our responsibility to the wider community. A contemporary expression of spirituality is sometimes called spiritual health. Health is no longer understood as the absence of disease or illness but now includes a sense of wholeness and well being. The world needs spiritually healthy people who stand in right relationship with themselves, with other people, with the earth and with God.

You stand in right relationship when you realize that you are in communion with all creation. Science has confirmed the interconnectedness of all creation with the great story of the beginning of the Universe. To be is to be related. In the very first instant

when the primitive particles rushed forth, every one of them was connected to every other one in the entire universe. The spiritually healthy person does not forge relationships as much as discover that they have always existed.

Our towns and cities of the world need spiritually healthy individuals who are able to live publicly and be hospitable to what is different and unfamiliar. We need you to celebrate personal hope, to invest in social capital and to transform spiritual wilderness into centres of personal, social and economic creativity. Our planet needs you because a spiritually healthy person accepts a responsibility to the well-being of the earth. You study, teach and serve in an institution that nurtures a river that can help you discover that you are already a person in relationship with others, the world and God. Allow yourselves the time to refresh yourselves and your deepest yearnings to become a spiritually healthy person. We make our own way but all journey together. We keep company with one another as we journey from the private and the personal into a community which freely, joyfully and fearlessly inhabits the civic, public arena and the earth. Our river's presence throughout the world reminds us of our responsibilities beyond our borders but also beyond the former boundaries of our institutions. Many of our educational institutions are not only members of an international tradition but have become international within their own boundaries. Our Notre Dame River is also multi-cultural.

### **The River Thames is a Multi-Cultural River**

London is one of the most diverse cultural cities in the world. The River Thames is a Multi-Cultural River reflecting the dazzling diversity in the student population of

Notre Dame Southwark. This variety in student population is undoubtedly true of many of your institutions. The expansion of Notre Dame around the world has made us sensitive to cultures other than our own. St. Julie's vision that we are to go all over the world prompted Belgian Notre Dame Sisters within thirty-six years of our founding, to cross an ocean. Since that first journey, countless trips have been made by thousands of Sisters of Notre Dame throughout the world. Those long journeys to other cultures have foreshortened in our era. We now meet those different cultures in our classrooms.

We are often faced with a school body that looks like an assembly of the United Nations. Sociologists categorize cultures of the southern hemisphere as sociocentric where the identity of the person is primarily defined in the context of the group. In the northern hemisphere the cultures are individualist or egocentric. This latter is not a negative description but a description of an identity forged primarily as an individual rather than in the context of a group. We are facing the same challenge within the Congregation. Transnational enterprises train their employees in "cultural competence," which is sufficient knowledge and respect so that business can succeed. We can do no less in the great enterprise of education.

In order to meet the challenge of education within cultural diversity and to prepare our students to live well in a multi-cultural world, it requires the River of Leadership.

### **The River Aire is a River of Leadership**

One thing I know about our school in Leeds is that many young women became Sisters of Notre Dame. We can deduce that the leadership in Leeds inspired others to become leaders. This, of course, is only a small sample of the population but based on

this history, allow me the freedom to attribute the quality of Leadership to Leeds. As I have said previously, all of these qualities apply to all of you.

In speaking of leadership, I propose that a way of looking at education in Notre Dame is to consider that its purpose is to prepare leaders. I am not suggesting the stereotypical model of leaders as the few at the top of an organization such as company presidents, principals or coaches. We might call this the 1% model referring to the 1% at the top of an organization. What about the other 99%? Influenced by the recent book, **HEROIC LEADERSHIP** by Chris Lowney, I propose that we consider leadership through a much wider prism. This notion of leadership is far beyond techniques and tactics for leading others. **Leaders are those who influence others and produce change.** Everyone has influence and everyone projects influence – good or bad, large or small- all the time. “Leadership is defined not by the scale of the opportunity but by the quality of the response.”<sup>1</sup> In this model, leadership opportunities are not only in the workplace but also in the ordinary activities of everyday life. In this expansive approach, Lowney suggests that four differences stand out:

- We’re all leaders, and we’re leading all the time, well or poorly.
- Leadership springs from *within*. It’s about *who I am* as much as what I do.
- Leadership is not an act. It is my *life*, a way of living.
- I never complete the task of becoming a leader. It’s an ongoing process.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-year-old Company that Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005) 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

To lead and form leaders with such an expansive vision requires the River Wisdom.

### **The River Wisdom**

In closing, I would like to offer another vision of a river from the Bible. In the Wisdom Tradition of the Old Testament, Wisdom is symbolized as water. “For her thoughts are more abundant than the sea, and her counsel deeper than the great abyss” (Sirach 24:29). The author of the passage is seeking Wisdom and describes the desire to gather water from the river of Wisdom by preparing a water channel as if his life was a garden. In that way, the water of Wisdom can come to the person. The text reads, “I watered my garden and drenched my flower-beds. And lo, my canal became a river, and my river a sea.”

You also have access to a river of Wisdom that came with the Sisters of Notre Dame when they founded your institutions and nourished them with vision and dedication. They continue to flow today with vibrancy and clarity as part of the great river system of Notre Dame throughout the world. The rivers of Britain have embodied the Wisdom of our tradition as well as making their own unique contribution to the history of the Congregation. You are indeed privileged to live with these rivers. You need to make the effort to open a channel for the water to enter into your life. The endeavor is small compared to the rich reward of your channel widening to a river. Drink deeply from its springs and they will nourish you all of your life and become a source of refreshment for others.

In the name of the Congregation, I wish to thank all of you who serve competently and faithfully in the Notre Dame Schools. You serve in the same spirit of St.

Julie with the life-giving waters but also the fog that arises from them. It is because of you that these great rivers of memory, vision, inspiration, simplicity, responsibility, internationality, leadership and Wisdom continue to flow with energy and vibrancy. Because of you, we continue to sing, “Ah! Qu’il est bon le bon Dieu!”

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