

Madeleine Sophie Barat's Spirituality of the Sacred Heart



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*'For the sake of a single child, I would have founded
the Society of the Sacred Heart.'*

Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779-1865) remains one of the great spiritual figures of 19th-century France. Through her, a luminous synthesis unfolds between contemplation and action, prayer and education, humility and apostolic influence. In an era marked both by the aftermath of Jansenism and the upheavals of the Revolution, she was able to offer a trusting spirituality centred on the love of the Heart of Christ.

Her intuition was clear: to make the Heart of Jesus known and loved through the education of the heart and the mind. She wanted every house of the Sacred Heart to be a place where faith was transmitted less by words than by the witness of an evangelical life, where gentleness and charity revealed the face of God.

This conference proposes to explore the spirituality of the Sacred Heart through two main themes: first, the inner formation of Madeleine Sophie, shaped by the slow liberation from a Jansenist heritage to enter into trust and love; then, the union of the Heart and action, where education becomes an act of faith and charity, a living participation in the mission of Christ.

By retracing this path, we will better understand how the spirituality of the Sacred Heart, far from being a simple devotional movement, constitutes a true school of Christian life: a call to love, to serve and to transform the world through the power of a heart united with that of Jesus.

I. MADELEINE SOPHIE BARAT: A SOLID, EDUCATIONAL AND INNER SPIRITUALITY

1. A paradoxical genesis: a Jansenist childhood

Madeleine Sophie was born into a family influenced by Jansenism, a rigorous and severe branch of Catholicism marked by an excessive fear of God. However, within this household, an image of the Sacred Heart was displayed, a symbol of love and mercy.

This paradox between fear and love would mark Madeleine Sophie's entire spiritual youth. It would take her years to move from a vision of God as Judge to one of God as Love.

Later, during her training in Paris with her brother Louis, before her religious consecration, she embroidered an image of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, which she gave to her mother. This embroidery already reflected her mystical fervour:

The flames of the burning Heart of Jesus, the Heart pierced by the lance and the blood poured into a chalice. And the Heart of Mary, pierced by the sword of sorrow. The lily of purity and the rose of charity. The instruments of the Passion: the cross, the lance, the hyssop and the vinegar. The pelican giving its heart to feed its young, symbol of the Eucharistic gift of Christ, who died to save us. The serpent and the apple, symbols of evil, defeated by the cross.

This embroidery already expresses her desire to make the Heart of Christ known and loved, to be a witness to it in her daily commitments.

2. A slow spiritual maturation

Torn between a thirst for holiness and a feeling of unworthiness, Madeleine Sophie went through a deep interior struggle that shaped the depth of her faith.

This long and demanding journey was illuminated by the influence of Father Favre, her spiritual director, who in the 1830s helped her to overcome the Jansenist legacy of her childhood and open herself to the love of the Sacred Heart.

She later confided:

‘There was a time when, on your little mountain of Sainte-Marie, I asked God to send me many crosses, for it seemed to me that I would never have enough; now, it is enough for me to accept them with love.’ (Adèle Cahier, II, p. 557)

Strengthened by this human and spiritual maturation, she can respond with tender firmness to those who are going through the ordeal of scruples. This is how she addresses a religious overwhelmed by the temptation of despair:

“God loves you and wants to save you, that is obvious, and the only fault you have to reproach yourself for is doubting it. You are wrong to seek the remedy for your troubles in me; it must come from Jesus and your trust in him.” (Adèle Cahier, II, p. 367)

3. The affirmation of the Sacred Heart in the educational mission

From the very beginning of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Madeleine Sophie expressed a deep desire: that all educational work should be rooted in the love of Christ.

Christian education cannot be reduced to moral or intellectual guidance; it is above all a living transmission of faith, an initiation into the mystery of divine love revealed in the Heart of Jesus.

Aware that the name carries a mission, she committed herself to ensuring that the congregation could officially bear the name Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

This designation is not symbolic: it expresses a fundamental spiritual orientation to conform religious life and the educational apostolate to the love of the Heart of Christ.

Thus, teaching becomes much more than an educational service: it is an act of love, a participation in the mystery of redemption.

For Madeleine Sophie, loving children, teaching them the truth with gentleness and rigour, and helping them to grow in faith, was making known and glorifying the Heart of Jesus. She saw education as active contemplation, a way of uniting action and prayer, mission and spirituality, in a single act of offering.

4. Characteristics of her spirituality

Madeleine Sophie's devotion to the Sacred Heart is deeply embodied: far from being a sentimental piety, it is rooted in a demanding inner experience focused on action.

It rests on three pillars:

- Prayer and interior life, nourished by the Eucharist;
- Educational action, in the service of transforming the world;
- Humility and fraternal love, lived out on a daily basis.

Here are two characteristics of Madeleine Sophie's Sacred Heart spirituality that emerged during her canonisation process.

a) A spirituality of humility and littleness

Madeleine Sophie insisted that the congregation consider itself a humble servant in the Church.

Adèle Cahier, her secretary, recounts this significant episode from 1864, on the eve of her last Feast of the Sacred Heart, when a preacher had just praised the congregation: 'Mother Barat hastened to correct this: [...] we who know what it is, we humiliate ourselves deeply before Him, we ask Him to forgive us all the faults we have committed in His service. Let us never forget that we are, among religious orders, the last to arrive, and the smallest in the Church.' (Adèle Cahier, II, p. 580)

And until her last moments, she reminded them of the importance of humility.

Adèle Cahier recounts an event dating from May 1865: "The day before the crisis that took her life reduced her to silence, she went into the room where the coadjutrix sisters were meeting and addressed them with these words: "Be very humble, my good daughters; you will say: but our Mother is rambling, she always tells us the same thing! Ah! It is because if this one degree were missing from the ladder of your perfection, even if you had all the others, you would not reach heaven". And as she was being led away to get some fresh air, she turned back to repeat: "You understand, my good daughters, with this one step missing, you could not get there". It was her last farewell." (Adèle Cahier, II, p. 599)

b) Charity, a reflection of the Heart of Christ

Her entire religious and apostolic life was imbued with charity.

In # 74 of the Constitutions* of 1815, she emphasizes its fundamental place: "With regard to the practice of charity, they will remember that it is principally for this virtue that Jesus Christ offered his divine Heart to us all as a model, saying: "Love one another as I have loved you". '

Thus, devotion to the Sacred Heart is not private worship: it is a way of living, loving and serving, in a spirit of humility, abandonment and fidelity.

II. THE UNION OF HEART AND ACTION: THE SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OF MADELEINE SOPHIE BARAT

1. An interior life at the heart of action

Madeleine Sophie embodies a deeply contemplative spirituality, lived out in educational action and in governing the Society of the Sacred Heart.

In a letter to Mother Gonzague Laure Junot (January 30, 1857), she writes:

"Teach them to put Jesus first; get them used to carrying him everywhere in contemplation, attentive to his holy presence, at least by a tendency of the heart; it is the sunflower that naturally follows the sun that attracts, illuminates and enlivens it."

This image of the sunflower sums up her spiritual life: living in the light of Christ, seeking him in all things, uniting contemplation and daily duty.

*In 1987, the texts of 1815 and 1982 received joint approval, as one could not be separated from the other.

2. An apostolic passion

Madeleine Sophie sought to make Christ's love known through educational and charitable work.

In a world in spiritual crisis after the Revolution, she responded to the need for Christian reconstruction with an active and confident faith.

Her foundations throughout the world bear witness to a missionary zeal sustained by prayer and trust in the Heart of Christ.

3. The Heart of Jesus at the centre

Madeleine Sophie placed the Heart of Christ at the centre of her life and work.

In 1846, she said to the novices and religious of Conflans:

"You know that [the Heart of Jesus] is the founder of this little Society; long before it existed, he made known to his servants that it should combine the interior spirit of Saint Teresa, the humility and gentleness of Saint Ambrose, and the zeal of Saint Ignatius." (Adèle Cahier, II, p. 425)

And later at the same novitiate:

'Ah! Devotion to the Sacred Heart brings everything together: it is the devotion of love... If we understood it, how we would love it; what a burning desire we would have to see it spread and be known to all; what holy pride we would feel in belonging to this Sacred Heart, in bearing its name, in being persecuted for its love!... (Lectures by Madeleine-Sophie Barat, II, June 5, 1848)

This intuition continues in the spiritual tradition of the Society of the Sacred Heart to this day, as expressed in the 1982 Constitutions (No. 7, quoted by Pope Francis in *Dilexit nos*, No. 150):

'Caught up as we are in the desires of His Heart, we want people to grow in dignity, as human beings and as children of God. Our starting point is the Gospel with all that it demands from us of love, forgiveness and justice, and of solidarity with those who are poor and rejected by the world.'

Conclusion

Madeleine Sophie Barat exudes a consummate spirituality: both interior and apostolic, humble and daring, deeply centred on the Heart of Jesus.

She teaches us:

- to unite action and prayer,
- to serve with humility,
- to love with strength and gentleness,
- to hope with confidence, even in the depths of night.

For her, true devotion to the Sacred Heart is not simply a form of worship or a practice: it is a way of life, an offering of humble and joyful love so that Love may be loved.