

Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat

Good evening, everyone.

Let me say up front, as I told Marie Pierre when she asked me to speak about Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat: I am not an expert on her life. I have no academic knowledge of her charism, and it was only this summer that I found myself putting in order, in the light of a deeper knowledge, my own life experience with the Saint. Mine, therefore, will be more of a testimony.

A bond that comes from afar

I would say that my knowledge of Madeleine Sophie has its origin in my DNA. Both my grandmothers, one from Naples and one from Florence, were pupils of the Sacred Heart in their cities. And as we know, grandmothers are grandmothers, for grandchildren of every generation. I, who bear the names of both, Maria and Amalia, could not help breathing in at home a certain way of being a woman, a wife and a mother.

Madeleine Sophie was convinced that society could be renewed through women. In the Pentecost Conference of 1834 she said:

«The coming generation must be regenerated by women.»

In an age when women were above all expected to stay in their place, she wanted to educate her pupils to be «citizens of the Kingdom» and, at the same time, «citizens of the world»: free, cultured women, responsible for the common good. My grandmothers were shaped, at least a little, in this way: a knowledge, a critical and intuitive capacity that was entirely feminine, which has always been a great inspiration to me.

The seed that blooms later

When my parents, who lived in Rome, had to choose a school for me and then for my brothers, they did not choose the Sacred Heart only because of my grandmothers: for them, young workers in a new city, the Sacred Heart was a guarantee.

I attended it until the end of middle school, then continued my classical studies at a state school. In my years as a Sacred Heart student, although happy to follow in my grandmothers' footsteps, I don't think I fully understood the preciousness of the educational project I was immersed in. I understood it years later, in the move to the state school and then as an adult: the seed that had been planted bloomed later.

This is a great comfort to me now that I teach at the Sacred Heart. How many seeds we plant with effort without being given to see their fruits right away! After all, Madeleine Sophie looked at each pupil as «a garden to be cultivated with patience».

During my university years the image of Mater Admirabilis, so dear to my grandmothers, always stayed in my heart; and to her I returned later in life. The

Sacred Heart led me to Mary: a seed that was anything but insignificant, the fruit of an educational project that works in silence, day after day, in the furrow of history.

Since the times of Madeleine Sophie, and since the times of my grandmothers, many things have changed: the girls' school has opened to boys, and the structure of school institutions has changed. But has the heart of the project changed? I believe not. She herself asked, in 1864, to review and complete the curricula, but «without ever sacrificing our principal aim to the trends of the century». Forms change; the heart remains.

The return, as a teacher

I came back to this school as a consecrated woman, with the desire to teach, and as a former pupil I immediately found the doors open. I say it simply: I had not thought at all of teaching in a private school, nor at the Sacred Heart. I was thinking of a state school, of a more varied social context. But, as you know, we make wonderful plans and God undoes them.

It was in this phase that I wanted to look deeper and understand what lay behind the project, behind the heart. As a teacher I experienced entering into the *ratio* of this pedagogy, and I found a school guided in a way that won me over.

Madeleine Sophie loved to repeat:

«Education must embrace the whole being: spirit, heart and hands.»

Already in the Plan of Education of Amiens, in 1808, she asked that instruction form «well-made heads and rightly directed hearts», anticipating by almost two centuries the «well-made head» that Edgar Morin speaks of today. Her inspiration came from the Jesuits' *Ratio studiorum*, but rethought with an entirely feminine sensibility: caring for the intellect, caring for the person through good habits, educating also for concrete work, always so that each girl might grow free and responsible.

And she had understood, with great modernity, that a school like this does not rest on a single person. From 1826 she wanted a general mistress of studies to whom all the teachers could turn, then inspectresses, then normal schools to train new teachers. She said that the educational work does not belong to a single religious, however good, but to all, in «a reciprocal concert and in the most perfect accord». This is exactly what I found here: an educating community.

From heart to heart

Cor ad cor loquitur, «heart speaks to heart», was the motto of Saint John Henry Newman, whom Pope Leo XIV proclaimed last year a Doctor of the Church and co-patron of the educational mission, alongside Saint Thomas Aquinas; and he is also the saint of my Oratorian family. «From heart to heart» is exactly the heart of Madeleine Sophie's method.

She founded the Society of the Sacred Heart in a dramatic context. She was ten years old when the French Revolution broke out: she saw priests persecuted, churches destroyed, tabernacles desecrated; her brother Louis ended up in prison and escaped the guillotine by chance. From there her conviction was born: faith is saved by forming consciences. And instead of fleeing from the world she chose to educate. We, on the other hand, often say that our times are the worst.

On this, Newman always comes to my mind:

«But in truth the whole course of Christianity from the first, when we come to examine it, is but one series of troubles and disorders. Every century is like every other, and to those who live in it seems worse than any that has gone before it. The Church is ever ailing and lingering, "always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our body." Religion seems ever expiring, schism dominant, the light of Truth dim, its followers scattered. The cause of Christ is ever in its last agony, as if it were only a matter of time before it fails definitively, today or another day. The saints seem ever on the point of disappearing from the earth, and Christ on the point of returning; and so the Day of Judgment is literally always at hand; and it is our duty to be always watchful, without being disappointed for having said so often "now is the time," and because in the end, contrary to our expectations, the Truth has somehow risen again.»¹

The mission today

Today the mission at the Sacred Heart has two faces. On one side we educate young people in situations very similar to those of my grandmothers and of Madeleine Sophie's young women: children of solid families, who choose us and with whom there is a great educational dialogue.

On the other side there are pupils in whom, every day, we contemplate the Heart of Jesus: young people who have everything and have nothing, who lack love, a welcoming home. And we welcome their parents, lost, confused about what to do, before whom every judgment about their responsibility for their children's struggles falls away.

This too is in the DNA of the Sacred Heart... we have many poor in spirit whom we welcome every day. For her, every act of patience, every gesture of kindness toward a difficult pupil was a way of consoling the Heart of Christ. Here again is the Heart of Jesus, the Heart of Mary.

A friend in heaven

It is in the face of all this that Madeleine Sophie, from a stranger, became for me a friend in heaven. I have read a great deal about her, but I am certainly not the most suitable person to speak to you about her. And yet, to carry forward a pedagogy that looks at each pupil with what she called «strong gentleness», firmness and tenderness together, one can only ask for help from her wise roots, about which for years I had never asked myself any questions, and recount them to our lay

colleagues, who discover the charism through concrete life.

First of all, the need to hold together action and contemplation. She asked her religious to be «Martha fused with Mary», and she wrote: «The interior life is the foundation of every work.» Without the contemplative side we cannot face in Christ everything that school life asks of us: we would be broken after a few days, and often we are, because we are weak in our journeys.

In this I always find the beauty of this place and the sign of a great Saint, who does not put herself at the centre, but a heart guarded by Mater.

Thank you.