

LEADING IN MISSION

Exploring the SNDdeN Charism in
Education, Healthcare and Social Justice

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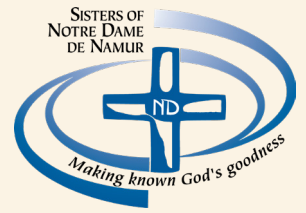
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Leading in Mission - Volume 1

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN) make known God's goodness through educating for life and taking a stand with people living in poverty, especially women and children.

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The Practice of Mission-Centered Leadership

EACH GENERATION IS CALLED to discover anew what it means to carry forward the mission entrusted to us. In a rapidly changing world, Notre Dame de Namur leaders are invited to respond with creativity, courage and hope, grounded in the enduring spirit of Saint Julie Billiart and trust in the goodness of God.

Leading in Mission presents a collection of reflections on lived experiences of leadership within the Notre Dame de Namur tradition. Each contribution offers a unique perspective on embodying mission through service, collaboration, discernment and commitment in diverse contexts. Together, these essays remind us that mission-centered leadership is not defined by a single style or position, but by relationships, humility and a willingness to serve something greater than ourselves.

We extend our gratitude to each contributor for sharing their experiences and wisdom so generously. In the words of Saint Julie Billiart, "Let us do God's work in a manner worthy of Him. Courage! But let it be undaunted and generous." May these reflections encourage thoughtful dialogue and inspire all who read them in their own journey of mission-centered leadership.

Peace,
East-West Sponsorship Office Staff



JULIE DOWD, KATIE COLIN, KIM WECKBACHER,
KATIE-SUE SCULLIN & AMY JOBIN

Dear Partners in Mission,

LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF EXTENSIVE STUDY, with countless efforts to define its nature, characteristics and practice. Yet the question remains enduringly relevant: What does it truly mean to lead? While many concepts of leadership emphasize authority or positional influence, such perspectives can overlook the deeply relational nature of effective leadership.

Within the Notre Dame de Namur tradition, leadership is understood not as the work of a select few, but as a shared responsibility rooted in collaboration, mutual respect and a commitment to the common good. This tradition recognizes that flourishing communities depend upon individuals who contribute their unique gifts in partnership with others. Leadership is not defined simply by status or title, but by a willingness to serve, to listen deeply, to discern together and to bring people into a shared commitment to mission.

This understanding is grounded in the spirituality and vision of Saint Julie Billiart, whose unwavering confidence in the goodness of God and in the dignity and potential of every person continues to shape Notre Dame de Namur ministries today. Her conviction that "a person does more good in the place where Divine Providence has put her than would all others with more talents" reminds us that effective leadership is measured not by recognition or extraordinary ability, but by faithful presence, generosity of spirit and a commitment to the mission entrusted to us.

For those who lead ministries sponsored by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, leadership is both a privilege and a profound responsibility. It calls leaders to steward a living charism to ensure that the Gospel values embodied by Saint Julie and the first Sisters continue to animate our institutions and communities. Through governance, education, pastoral ministry and outreach, leaders are called to cultivate cultures that reflect God's goodness, promote justice, honor the dignity of every person and foster hope for the future.

We are sincerely grateful to those who work, lead and support our sponsored ministries and pray for your continued growth in this mission.

Blessings,
U.S. East-West Leadership Team



Sister Ginny
SISTER VIRGINIA SCALLY

Sister Maria
SISTER MARIA DELANEY

Sister Pat
SISTER PAT O'BRIEN

Sister Kathryn
SISTER KATHRYN KEENAN

Sister Roberta
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Leadership & Mission

Leadership Lessons from the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur: Building Resilience through Autonomy and Self-Determination

BY KELLY BASILE, Ph.D.

The following is adapted from a keynote address at the SNDdeN National School Leaders Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, November 2025.

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, I have had the privilege of interviewing several Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN) as part of an oral history project at Emmanuel College. The goal of my portion of this research is to better understand the leadership strategies of the SNDdeN and assess the impact of these strategies on the individuals served. What became quickly clear is that, despite serving in a wide variety of leadership contexts, including congregational leadership, community leadership, educational leadership and other mission-based leadership, the Sisters consistently articulate leadership philosophies deeply rooted in the charism of the SNDdeN and the teachings of Saint Julie Billiart. Their approaches are remarkably aligned yet uniquely expressed through their individual ministries.

Grounded in mission and with a focus on empowering those they serve, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur simply “get things done” regardless of the challenges they face.

One story that captures the essence of SNDdeN leadership came from Sister Peggy Cummins, SNDdeN during an interview in Ipswich, Massachusetts. After discussing her work in schools and with refugees, she paused and said almost casually, “I just skipped one of the most important ministries I’ve ever had—our safe house.” She then recounted the founding of Bakhita House, a safe

home for women who had been trafficked. Named for Saint Josephine Bakhita, the program emerged from years of SNDdeN attention to human trafficking and the determination of a small group of Sisters to create a place for safety and healing. Although Sister Peggy described the process as if it unfolded naturally, the reality required extraordinary perseverance. The Sisters secured a home, established a 501(c)(3), built partnerships with the FBI and Homeland Security and created a space where women could receive shelter, education, therapy and community. Sister Peggy recalled that some women told them, “At the end of the day, you’re all we have,” and shared stories of women celebrating their first birthday party or achieving milestones they once thought impossible. Her reflections were humble, yet the impact of the work was profound.

I begin with this story not because it is an outlier, but because it exemplifies the SNDdeN approach to leadership. Grounded in mission and with a focus on empowering those they serve, the SNDdeN simply “get things done” regardless of the challenges they face.

Research Findings

Analysis of interviews with the SNDdeN yielded several key themes that illustrate their leadership approach and leadership effectiveness.

Theme 1: Being with People

The first theme emerging from the oral history interviews was “being with people.” Rooted in the post-Vatican II call to live among and accompany the communities they served, the shift from convent to community-centered ministries allowed the SNDdeN to better respond to local needs and exercise greater autonomy in discerning meaningful missions. Sisters described the loss of the traditional habit as an important symbol of this change, noting that it enabled them to walk alongside people as equals. This shift fostered deeper mutual trust and reinforced their shared

sense of purpose.

The SNDdeN engaged in “being with people” by embedding themselves in communities and identifying their needs through listening. From discerning their own congregation’s future to collaborating with communities in the Congo, listening allowed the SNDdeN to understand needs, co-create solutions, and grow as leaders. Apostolic mobility also expanded as part of “being with people,” giving the SNDdeN greater freedom to pursue ministries based on real community needs rather than institutional directives. This mobility aligns with the SNDdeN mission of being “Women with Hearts as Wide as the World” which empowers the SNDdeN to serve in the most neglected places, from Navajo communities to remote regions of the Congo. In this expanded, more autonomous model of mission, the Sisters crossed borders and boundaries to find places where they could make a difference. As one Sister noted “...(Find) where no one would like to go in this country and you find a Sister of Notre Dame.”

Theme 2: Leadership in the Members Gathered

A second theme emerging from the interviews was the belief that “leadership resides in the members gathered.”

Influenced by the Catholic Church’s synodal approach, the SNDdeN embraced participative decision-making and shared authority versus hierarchical leadership. However, this shift often created tension between obedience and autonomy, as Sisters navigated the need to honor congregational decisions while also exercising personal agency in their ministries. Leaders described the challenge of respecting individual autonomy while still guiding the congregation, and followers spoke of accepting assignments out of obedience even when the roles did not align with their interests or talents.

Leadership among the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur is not about directing change from above but about creating the conditions for oppressed communities to shape their own futures.

Importantly, the SNDdeN emphasized that this tension between obedience and autonomy often led to unexpected growth and meaningful service. In part, this was due to

engaging in individual discernment, involving prayer, reflection and information-seeking to make decisions consistent with their sense of what was right. In addition, the SNDdeN also spoke frequently about “muddling through” representing their willingness to step into unfamiliar roles, persist through challenges and respond creatively to the needs before them. By “muddling through,” the Sisters frequently found themselves addressing complex social, pastoral or logistical problems far beyond their formal training.

Lessons from the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur remind us that leadership is not something we ‘do’ but something we co-create within our communities. We learn to meet people where they are, adapt our work to newly arising needs and empower those who are marginalized to shape their own futures.

Theme 3: Liberation Leadership

A third theme emerging from SNDdeN leadership stories was “Liberation Leadership.” Rooted in Liberation Theology, this approach emphasizes walking alongside oppressed communities and engaging in collective action against injustice. Evident in this work was the SNDdeN engagement in conscientization, which involved helping people recognize oppressive structures and create change through their own agency. This approach was exemplified by Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, who empowered rural Brazilian communities to recognize systemic oppression and organize to defend their rights in the face of violence and exploitation. In addition, the Sisters practiced deference, meaning they intentionally shifted power toward local leaders and communities. Recognizing the limits of their own perspective, Sisters would step back to allow local members to lead in ways that reflected their own cultural perspective and lived experience. These practices suggest that leadership among the SNDdeN is not about directing change from above but about creating the conditions for oppressed communities to shape their own futures.

Learnings for SNDdeN Educational Leaders

Understanding the leadership lessons gained from the lived experiences of the SNDdeN is one step, however the next challenge is to consider how we, as educators in SNDdeN academic institutions, can use these lessons to better support our own educational missions. Rather than provide proscriptive suggestions, I think it is better for each of us to engage in autonomous and reflexive practice, guided by the exemplars of the SNDdeN, to discern which actions will be most meaningful for the communities we serve. Therefore, I propose a series of questions to help us consider the presence of the SNDdeN leadership strategies in our own practice:

Being with People

- » What intentional pathways for listening and feedback have we created in our organizational cultures and structures?
- » How do we identify the needs and priorities of our students and staff?
- » How can we support individual agency in goal setting?

Leadership in the Members Gathered

- » Where do we see shared leadership in our institutions? In our classrooms?
- » In what way do we maintain our important academic structures, such as formal assessment, while at the same time creating space for autonomy?
- » How do we foster the enjoyment of challenge and let students know that it is OK to muddle through?

Liberation Leadership

- » In what ways do our students see us walking the same pathways that they face?
- » How do we help our students recognize the forms of oppression that create roadblocks to their education or career progression?
- » How and when do we step back and let our students take on a leadership role?

Lessons from the SNDdeN remind us that leadership is not something we ‘do’ but something we co-create within our communities. We learn to meet people where they are, adapt our work to newly arising needs and empower those who are marginalized to shape their own futures. By recognizing our own autonomy as well as that of our students and colleagues, we can learn to listen, discern and act in ways that honor the spirit of the SNDdeN and shape educational environments so that every person is empowered to contribute to the shared mission. ✱



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For 221 Years Julie and Françoise Lived the Mission: Now is Our Turn to Live Their Courage

BY SISTER PATRICIA CHAPPELL, SNDdEN

The following keynote address was given at the SNDdEN National School Leaders Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, November 2025.

IN 1774, IN A LITTLE FARMING TOWN IN CUVILLY, France, it is a calm evening. Julie and her father are quietly sitting together, each one with their own thoughts, when a rock and a bullet are fired into their sitting area, shattering the quiet time and traumatizing both 23-year-old Julie and her aging father. As a result of this incident, Julie developed neuralgia which weakened all her muscles, making walking very difficult and painful.

Eight years later, at 31, an epidemic killed a quarter of the town of Cuvilly and Julie was left with a paralysis that eventually affected her jaw, rendering her, at times, unable to speak.

All of this was happening in the ferment of the French Revolution. The Billiard family could only guess at what was happening in Paris, since some of the unrest was spilling over to towns and cities in France. They heard of the political purges, corruption, executions, fear, revenge and retaliation, too many orphans, lack of schools and attacks on Catholic priests. There was no medical care available for those who needed it most; only the noble class lacked nothing. The common people were fed up with the circumstances and systems of that time, and they knew the only way to achieve some semblance of equality was to fight so that liberty, equality and fraternity could become the characteristic stronghold of France.

Françoise Blin de Bourdon could not be more different from Julie Billiard. Born and raised in nobility, presented to the French royal court at Versailles, she had so much to lose if the Revolution was successful. Through a fascinating interplay of events (which are too lengthy to go into here) Julie and Françoise meet, and the lives of both women are radically changed. They had in common a spirituality which believed that with God's goodness—along with a large dose of courage—nothing was impossible. Their friendship is legendary.

Two statements became their guiding principles: "We must have hearts wide as the world," and, along with all

those entrusted to our care and responsibility, we are "to teach them what they need to know for life."

Our focus, as we became known as the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, was to have hearts that loved those made poor by life circumstances, economic systems, and unjust and racist policies.

Hope does not disappoint.

For Julie and Françoise, education was the key that would open doors for those denied entry, namely the girls and women denied an education and empowerment by all the power structures that existed: government, the churches and religious institutions.

We are here this morning, in the shadow and courage of these two women, Julie and Françoise, and countless others who for 221 years have carried their vision, wisdom and courage within an educational system that proclaims, "teach them what they need to know for life," while having "hearts wide as the world."

In 1891, there was an 81-year-old Pope who had no cell phone, no emails, no news outlets, no NY Times, no TV special reports. All he had was a watchful eye, a listening ear and a sensitive heart moved by the suffering and pain he saw all around him.

What he saw, heard and felt moved him to write the following principles:

- » Every human life, from womb to tomb, is sacred and is worthy of profound respect. No exceptions.
- » Families are central to social life, and everyone has a right to participate in society and in every group that one belongs to and is a part of.
- » Every person has fundamental rights and with these rights comes responsibilities to one another and to the wider community.
- » A moral society prioritizes the needs of those made poor and most vulnerable.
- » Work is a form of participation in God's creation and

workers have rights that must be respected.

- » We are but one family and we must work together for the common good.
- » We are called to protect the planet and its resources for future generations.

We can only imagine if our early Sisters at the end of the 18th century had heard of these principles, they would have sounded familiar as the bedrock of what and how we were educating.

These seven principles were written amid the Industrial Revolution that was spreading like wildfire in all of Europe and in the continental United States. Those times were marked by poverty, starvation, people living 10 to 12 in one tenement apartment and women and children getting critically hurt in accidents in the textile factories where cotton was turned into fabric. Salaries were pitiful. There was no insurance, no vacation time and work was non-stop seven days a week.

Now is the moment where we stand on solid ground with the mission of Notre Dame, and we who are leaders need to be fearless in proclaiming what we stand for ... Do we have the courage to live by the vision of non-violence and peace-making that Jesus lived and died for?

Slave owners in the southern U.S. refused to recognize these principles for obvious reasons: slaves were considered property, not as human beings, to be bought and sold as the owner wanted.

Factory owners refused to take the principles seriously.

Church leaders, including many of our beloved Catholic bishops, priests and religious congregations believed the principles would lead to an all-out rebellion since most of them had too much to lose if these principles were taken seriously. In fact, at this time, the Catholic Church was the largest slave-holding institution in the world. It just was not good economic business to treat slaves with dignity and respect.

And the people who were poor, marginalized, enslaved,

living on reservations, the women and men working in factories, along with the destitute in all major cities, were not to know about these principles. They were too dangerous to proclaim in sermons and homilies from the pulpit—and they still are!

By now, you must have realized that the author was Pope Leo XIII and these principles become known as our Catholic Social Teaching. It was the best kept secret in our Catholic Church—and it still is!

Now is certainly the time when the mission meets the moment. The moral issues facing us today in our world and particularly in our country impact you and me daily, you who are partners in mission with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The time is now to proclaim with courage and clarity the goodness of God. Our mission of proclaiming goodness must meet this moment. Whether we are in day care settings, preschools, elementary, middle school, high schools, academies, prep schools or colleges/universities. Whether we are part of the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers, alternative educational opportunities, adult learning classes, and the list could go on.

Now is the moment where we stand on solid ground with the mission of Notre Dame, and we who are leaders need to be fearless in proclaiming what we stand for. We have the Gospel along with the life and mission of Jesus. Do we have the courage to live by the vision of non-violence and peace-making that Jesus lived and died for?

We have Catholic Social Teachings to transform us and the world. Do we have the courage to teach these as living principles and not old and dead ideas? Begin to imagine what kind of Church we could have today if these are taken seriously.

We have the Hallmarks of a Notre Dame Learning Community, formulated 20 years ago, which must be inscribed into all our hearts and not merely posted on bulletin boards and classroom walls.

However, for Notre Dame, that still is not enough. Our world, our churches and our country have kept people hostage by the misuse of power and privilege since their inception as institutions—and we look around only to see what that has done to all of us.

Hatred, indifference and hostility have been heaped upon those among us who are different, who are from another race, another country or practice another religion. These, our sisters and brothers, have been raped, castrated, tortured, sold, separated from their families, arrested, placed in prison camps and starved. Sound familiar?

All our institutions have prided themselves on “either/or” thinking, which leads us to efficiency in our family lives, our work, educational settings and worship places. The power in these institutions holds up a banner that says: “You are either for us or against us...we either win or lose.” It forces everyone to follow one correct way of speaking, thinking and doing things instead of fostering creativity and celebrating new ways of being and acting. Sound familiar?

This is the only time in history that we have to be the courage of Julie and Françoise. We are their hope for a vibrant future.

We have been convinced that we must maintain the groups and institutions we belong to by warped thinking that says we do not have enough resources for everyone to access. This leads to exploitation and distorted views regarding the distribution of resources. It creates a mentality so that if I have enough it does not matter if someone does not have enough to survive. This mentality has created the “have” and “have nots.” Both groups have grown with more “have nots” while greed and entitlement have inflated the “have” group and continues to do so at a frightening pace. Sound familiar?

The misuse of power has created a model of secrecy based on the idea that controlling information is power. It limits who can create, access and know information. Secrecy causes misinformation, confusion, manipulation and dishonesty. Sound familiar?

Finally, valuing competitiveness in institutions makes people see each other as rivals, not co-workers and collaborators. As a result, people end up divided, exhausted and polarized from each other.

All these traditional values rooted in Western Euro-Centric systems have allowed and continue to allow the racism, hatred and division in our world, country and Church to live and thrive. But I maintain: there has to be another way.

I call these “transformational values” that I believe are so desperately needed in our families, communities, schools, places of worship, our country and world today:

- » An antidote to either/or thinking is *Expansive Inclusivity*, or *Both/And Thinking* which values inclusivity and

effectiveness rather than efficiency. Different perspectives are not only valued but sought after. Curiosity produces creative strategies for the good of ALL.

- » *An Abundant World View* understands that abundance means to have “enough” for everyone to flourish. Abundance is about equity, not equality. Greed, hoarding and cruelty are the reasons children and families in this country go to bed hungry night after night.
- » *Transparency*, not secrecy, is rooted in the assertion that all living beings are inherently worthy and valuable and have a right to access opportunities and resources which will allow them to reach their highest potential. No one is to be exploited, dominated or discarded, called disparaging names or humiliated.
- » *Cooperation and Collaboration* encourage individual creativity and thrive in diverse environments with honesty and respect. Individual creativity happens within a responsible and accountable relationship with the rest of the community.

Are these transformational values mirrored in what we call the Hallmarks of a Notre Dame de Namur Learning Community?

Whether you are the president (full time or interim), principal, program manager, head of school, dean of students, director of mission integration, director of Notre Dame Mission Volunteers, teacher or vice-principal, you clearly proclaim by your life more than by your words that God is good. Do you really believe that?

Is everyone you come in contact with treated with honor and sacredness? The LGBTQ students (be they elementary through adulthood), the bully who spends more time in the office than in the classroom? The helicopter parent who has the school number on speed dial? Are all those you interact with treated as sacred, including our LGBTQ staff ministering with us?

Educating on behalf of justice means justice for everyone, no exceptions. Does the Black, Latinx, Asian, Native American child/parent know that they have a chance of success in your area even though they speak with an accent, have difficulty with English and have limited financial resources?

Commitment to community service is not an option if you are in a Notre Dame Institution. Do those doing

community service see you as principal, president, vice-president, head of school, etc., doing community service along with them?

Are you embracing the gift of diversity? Have you invited into your area of responsibility the racially diverse alumni of the last eight years and asked them to share honestly with you if they felt welcomed, wanted and appreciated while at a Notre Dame de Namur ministry? Besides providing an excellent education, what did you learn when you really listened to what they shared?

We strive to create a community where we work and serve. Community, not cliques, not clubs. Community must be an intentional place and attitude where everyone feels welcome and wanted, not just tolerated.

Develop holistic learning communities that educate life. Do we encourage creative and innovative thinking, or is there just one way of looking at things?

This is our moment. This is our mission. This is the only time in history that we have to be the courage of Julie and Françoise. We are their hope for a vibrant future.

So, where do we find hope? I begin with the opening words of Paul's letter to the Romans, the second reading on All Souls Sunday: Hope does not disappoint. Hope is not naïve, pie-in-the-sky, nor fodder for the disillusioned. Hope is real, achingly real, and it can produce incredible results. We all know that hope has worked miracles: the child you often wondered about who seemed to lack motivation and interest, wakes up at some point and invites us to her/his college graduation. Hope can change hearts, recover from addictions, face crippling fear and tragedies beyond words and imaginings. Hope can carry one through suffering, death, isolation and abandonment. Hope does not

disappoint.

At age 69, a Creole American from Chicago, Robert Prevost, changed his name to Pope Leo XIV, not a coincidence to select a name following Pope Leo XIII. Hope is not far away, beyond our grasp. It is in this room, within our families, places of worship, and in our schools and on the streets of each one of the cities you will return to. Hope is in you coming here, the conversations that it will generate, the impact of going home thinking about what you learned and the questions that will continue to surface. Hope does not disappoint.

- » Hope and believe in your own goodness.
- » Hope and believe in being a channel of change and embrace courage.
- » Hope and believe in the potential of all those you meet along the way.
- » Hope and know that you, with courage, can make a difference in bringing hope to others who are struggling.
- » Hope and believe that you have the ability and courage to add a unique measure of grace to a hurt and redeemed world.

In closing, my prayer to you is this: I dare you to have hearts as wide as the world and to teach our learners what is needed for life. Have courage and be the hope that will never disappoint. ✱



Sister Patricia Chappell, SNDdeN is the co-director of the U.S.A. SNDdeN Anti-Racism Team.

Notre Dame de Namur Leadership and Catholic Education Today

BY KATHLEEN COLIN

NO ONE NEEDS TO BE REMINDED of the challenges of our time. Yet it is our shared mission that gives us strength, hope and purpose.

As Saint Julie Billiart reminds us, “The more difficult the times are, the more we must expect and hope everything from the goodness of the good God” (Julie, Letter 260). It is through our distinctive Notre Dame de Namur spirit of leadership that we are called to respond faithfully to the ever-changing needs of our world—forming and encouraging students, families, alumni, colleagues and one another to become people of justice, compassion and social responsibility.

In Notre Dame de Namur leadership, the goodness of God is made visible through our actions. But what does that truly mean? What are we called to lead? What is our purpose today? And how does Catholic Social Teaching invite us to respond to the realities of our time?

We often speak of the enduring relevance of Saint Julie and Françoise Blin de Bourdon in today’s world, and rightly so. Their lives unfolded amid political upheaval, social division and profound uncertainty. Our own world is marked by many of the same realities: growing polarization, widening economic inequality, global conflict and even within the Church, ongoing questions about belief, leadership and the role of women.

Yet Saint Julie never allowed uncertainty to diminish hope. She wrote, “Let us stand fast, however bad the weather and however strong the wind may be; the good God will grant us the grace to profit from it if we don’t waste our time looking to see from which side the squall is coming” (Julie, Letter 9).

This is the heart of our mission and the foundation of Notre Dame de Namur leadership: to stand firm with courage, remain faithful to the goodness of God and trust that God’s grace will sustain us through every challenge.

Recently, Pope Leo XIV issued the Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope* to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s Declaration on Christian Education. In 1965, Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council affirmed the essential role of Catholic education in promoting both human dignity and social progress. Sixty years later, Pope Leo renews that vision, reminding us that “education is not an ancillary activity but forms the very

fabric of evangelization: it is the concrete way in which the Gospel becomes an educational gesture, a relationship, a culture.” He continues, “Educating is an act of hope and a passion that is renewed because it manifests the promise we see in the future of humanity.”

**“Catholic education can be a beacon:
not a nostalgic refuge, but a
laboratory of discernment,
pedagogical innovation, and prophetic
witness. Drawing new maps of hope:
this is the urgency of the mandate.”**

These words speak directly to the vocation of every Notre Dame de Namur educator and leader. They remind us not simply what we do, but who we are.

Building upon Pope Francis’s Global Compact on Education, Pope Leo reaffirms seven enduring commitments that continue to shape Catholic education:

- » Putting the person at the center
- » Listening to children and young people
- » Promoting the dignity and full participation of women
- » Recognizing the family as the first educator
- » Fostering acceptance and inclusion
- » Renewing the economy and politics in service of humanity
- » Protecting our common home

These commitments have inspired schools, universities and educational communities throughout the world to cultivate learning environments rooted in human dignity and integral development.

Pope Leo also identifies three emerging priorities for Catholic education:

- » Cultivating the interior life through silence, discernment and dialogue with conscience and with God

- » Forming students to use technology and artificial intelligence wisely and ethically, always placing the human person at the center
- » Promoting a language of peace that practices nonviolence, fosters dialogue and remains open to others

Finally, Pope Leo challenges Catholic institutions to ensure that education remains financially accessible. He writes, “Where access to education remains a privilege, the Church must push open doors and invent new paths, because ‘losing the poor’ is equivalent to losing the school itself.” And, once again, we hear Saint Julie’s unequivocal conviction: “If some children should come who cannot pay the fees, you must not send them away. Let us work with confidence in the vineyard of the Lord. God will be our reward!” (Julie, Letter 445).

Who are the poor and marginalized within the schools and ministries we lead? They may be those experiencing financial hardship, loneliness, mental health struggles, discrimination or spiritual poverty. How intentionally do we recognize them, accompany them and ensure they know they belong?

These words invite each of us to examine our own ministries. How does this call challenge us as Catholic and Notre Dame de Namur educational communities? Who are the poor and marginalized within the schools and ministries we lead? They may be those experiencing financial hardship, loneliness, mental health struggles, discrimination or spiritual poverty. How intentionally do we recognize them, accompany them and ensure they know they belong?

From the very beginning, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have responded courageously to the signs of the times. Through education, especially the education of girls, they have served those made poor, welcomed immigrants, defended human dignity and cared for our common home. This has always been our story. It must continue to be our story.

We are called to carry this mission forward by viewing today’s challenges through the lens of our faith, our charism and our unwavering hope. As Pope Leo writes, “Catholic education can be a beacon: not a nostalgic refuge, but a laboratory of discernment, pedagogical innovation, and prophetic witness. Drawing new maps of hope: this is the urgency of the mandate.”

To be the beacons of hope Pope Leo calls us to be today, and the women and men of courage that Saint Julie envisioned more than two centuries ago, is what makes Notre Dame de Namur leadership distinctive. To lead as a Catholic and within the Notre Dame de Namur tradition is both a profound responsibility and an enduring privilege. Our mission unites us across ministries, cultures and generations. It is the source of our hope, the foundation of our leadership and the path that will continue to carry us faithfully into the future. ✱



Kathleen (Katie) Colin is the Executive Director of Sponsorship for the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur U.S. East-West Province.

Leadership Starts with Others

BY JOAN PERRAULT

WHO COULD BE MORE DIFFERENT THAN JULIE AND FRANÇOISE? One was born a peasant with compromised health and very little education, and the other an aristocrat with access to the very best of everything. Despite the odds, they formed a friendship and a shared mission, resulting in a ministry that has lasted hundreds of years. Their partnership was based on an appreciation for their differences and an open-mindedness to each other's way of thinking, without which we may not have benefitted from the rich history of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Reflecting on my own experiences within the SNDdeN ministries, I realize what an example Julie and Françoise set for all of us. The care they extended to one another in times of need, their shared responsibility for the people they served, and their commitment to work together, no matter how different their origins or views, are essential for all of us to consider in establishing our own leadership style.

As educators, we are accustomed to talking, yet one of the most important qualities of a successful leader is the ability to listen.

For me, leadership starts with others. What I mean is that it begins with listening. As educators, we are accustomed to talking, yet one of the most important qualities of a successful leader is the ability to listen. Authentic listening is quite different than allowing someone airtime before jumping in with our own opinions. Instead, authentic listening means listening with an open mind to what others have to say.

As a leader, you have undoubtedly surrounded yourself with individuals whose experience and expertise will benefit you and the school. These individuals most likely come from different backgrounds (as did Julie and Françoise) and, as such, can offer a variety of interesting perspectives. An effective leader will listen to those varied perspectives, appreciate their value in any discussion, and incorporate them into productive decision-making.

However, listening can be challenging. As leaders, we are accustomed to being problem solvers and perhaps

believing we should have all the answers. But remember, you are surrounded by a team of problem solvers who may, in fact, offer a better solution than your own. So, allow yourself to listen, absorb and consider. It is worth the time and effort; you will never be disappointed. There is always something to learn.

Along with authentic listening comes respect. We may not all think alike, which is a good thing, but by making it clear that we value the input of others and respect differing points of view, we are acknowledging that the work of our team is critical to the school's success. Is it not fair to assume that if a member of the team feels valued, their experience as a professional is more satisfying, which, in turn, generates a stronger desire to contribute? It is a win for everyone.

Let's again consider Julie and Françoise. These remarkable women celebrated their unique qualities and built a deep, meaningful friendship rooted in genuine respect and admiration. By recognizing and honoring each other's strengths, they forged a powerful partnership aimed at making a positive impact together. Their story illustrates the transformative power of mutual respect and collaboration for the greater good.

Of course, there will be times when, as leaders, we do not always follow our best practices. Perhaps it is due to time limitations or an impatience with the discernment process. It happens to all of us. I'm guessing it happened to Julie and Françoise on occasion. But especially in those times of impatience, we must remind ourselves that far better outcomes arise from the team's collective thinking than any one person's hasty decision. Yes, one person may own the leadership title, but the collective talent of the people surrounding you adds strength and credibility to your leadership.

Remember, especially if you are new to your leadership position, that things take time. Not everything will be perfect all at once. Just as the friendship and partnership of Julie and Françoise evolved, so might it be for you. My advice to you is this: Take time to listen, take time to learn and take time to understand. If something isn't working for you, don't be afraid to acknowledge it. Humility is a great gift for any leader. Identifying when something isn't working or acknowledging that someone else's approach is

working better than yours is a sign of outstanding leadership. And I can assure you, your acts of humility take nothing away from the strength of your leadership. In fact, your humility adds strength to your leadership and, in turn, is likely to gain you the respect of those surrounding you.

Likewise, give credit where credit is due. Generously shine the light on others. Everyone appreciates being acknowledged for their contributions. A good leader values those contributions and extends gratitude to those who deserve it.

Your effectiveness as a leader is greatly enhanced by the people surrounding you.

And don't forget small gestures. While it is easy to say you value the members of your community, it is exceedingly more important to show it. Gestures do not have to be extraordinary. Our budgets do not allow for the extraordinary, nor is that the point. Simple gestures are all it takes. Make time for a conversation, acknowledge an important date or event, or arrange a simple treat. These gestures are never forgotten and can go a long way toward assuring your community that you genuinely appreciate them.

Julie and Françoise found success by trusting and depending on each other. There could be no better example of effective leadership than the partnership formed by these two extraordinary women. Keep them in mind as you navigate your way to successful leadership. Remember that you are not alone. Your effectiveness as a leader is greatly enhanced by the people surrounding you. They are ready to take the journey with you, so invite them in! ✱

Joan Perrault is a long-time Notre Dame de Namur educator currently serving as the chairperson of the board of directors at St. Patrick Elementary School and Learning Center in Lowell, Massachusetts.



Prayer to Saint Julie

BY SISTER LOUISE O'REILLY, SNDDEN AND MEG SHARP

GOOD AND GRACIOUS GOD, you inspired in Saint Julie a willingness and a passion to bring your goodness into the world.

As we look back on the risks that she took, on the crosses she bore, on the many times she had to begin anew, let us draw on her enduring spirit, her faith, her joy and her strength.

Crosses in the form of challenges, both small and large, mark our world, our work, and our path today.

Remind us, O God, to listen and to act upon the early inspiration of Julie. May we move her mission forward to serve those who are without access to education and resources. May others come to know your goodness and your love, infused in all that may challenge us.

We pray this trusting in your goodness and love, O God.

Amen.

Saint Julie, pray for us.

Leadership & Justice

Justice Beyond the Scale: Forming Hearts and Minds in Notre Dame de Namur Education

BY REV. FEDERICO CINNOCA, Ph.D.

The following keynote address was given at the Notre Dame Educators Symposium in Methuen, Massachusetts, March 2025.

JUSTICE IS OFTEN SYMBOLIZED BY THE SCALES, perfectly balanced, impartial and objective. But what if justice is something far greater than a mere calculation of fairness? What if it is not simply about giving each person their due (as in its classical formulation), but about lifting up those who have been forgotten, healing wounds, and transforming society with the radical energy of love? This is the vision of justice that Catholic education upholds. This is even more true in the Notre Dame tradition rooted in the conviction that our mission stems from experiencing God's goodness. Catholic schools are not just institutions of learning; they are spaces of formation, where students are shaped into agents of change. Our mission is not simply to advance knowledge but to educate citizens who will act for the common good. We are called not only to generate research but to generate solutions that create a better world for all, especially for those on the margins. This is easier said than done, especially when some of our students simply do not have the time or energy to take on additional commitments. The pursuit of justice can too easily become a privilege reserved for those with the means, yet it remains a responsibility of all. Given these realities, we must ask, "how do we ensure that all our students, regardless of their circumstances, are empowered to be agents of change in building a more just society?"

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will explore what social justice education looks like in Notre Dame communities; second, I'll discuss the need for our institutions to remain autonomous in their prophetic role; third, I will outline a vision of justice that moves beyond fairness to become a force of love that changes society.

Hallmark 3 states, "We educate for and act on behalf of justice, peace and care for all creation." Our reflection on

justice must address two key questions:

How can our institutions cultivate a sense of justice in all students, including those who may not have the privilege of engaging in service trips or extracurricular initiatives?

How can our institutions themselves embody justice and actively promote it in public life?

In this section, I will begin by exploring the first question.

Many of my students are first-generation Americans or have recently emigrated to this country. When midterms arrive, I make it a point to meet with each one of them individually for an oral exam. Some of them, at first, are nervous, but this setting allows me to have a personal conversation with each of them. I start asking simple questions like, "How are you doing?" "What are you interested in?" "What is your major?"

I recall one particular conversation that made me think. A student mentioned that they were majoring in finance. Knowing their passion for the humanities and literature, I was surprised. So, I asked, "Do you like it?" The student hesitated and responded, "It's not really about what I like but about what my family needs. I will need to provide for them."

For many students, the luxury of asking, "What do I love?" or "How do I think my talents are best spent?" is simply not an option. A gap of imagination prevents certain career paths or life outcomes from being envisioned. In this sense, for a Catholic institution to be just, it also means to fill what Patrick Reyes has famously defined the purpose gap. According to him, "the purpose gap exists where people cannot achieve what they were born to do. It exists when people cannot fulfill their calling, resulting in lives of meaning and purpose stolen from future generations" (Reyes, p. 4). Even more strongly, he states that the purpose gap is a "war on our children's future" (Reyes, p. 4).

Many of our programs emphasize service and social justice, and rightly so. We all may have some sort of service

trips or initiatives. But what does service mean for students who already work two or three jobs alongside their academic schedule? What does justice education look like for them? And how can Catholic education serve them better and still build a strong program that can support their education to become agents of change in our world?

Yes, Catholic education is not merely about producing professionals; it is about forming leaders with a compassionate hearth. As Roger Bergman (2011) notes, Catholic schools seek to cultivate both intellectual and ethical development, ensuring that students graduate not only with expertise but with a deep sense of responsibility for the world. This aligns with Catholic Social Teaching, which emphasizes that education should serve the dignity of the human person and the common good. But how do we address the barriers that prevent some students from even having the time to serve others or to care for their social justice education?

God's love doesn't fit into human ideas of fairness. It breaks the system. Divine love doesn't calculate who is worthy; it simply gives.

As I prepared for this talk, I explored literature on Catholic social justice education and service learning (Sokol 2011, Bergman 2011, Rausch 2010). Much of the scholarship focuses on Jesuit schools, emphasizing the transformative power of encounters and the call to educate students to be “men and women for others.” This vision is often realized through service trips and volunteer experiences. Yet, as Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit himself, points out, Jesus was not merely for us; He was with us. This distinction is crucial. The heart of social justice education should not simply be about performing acts of service, but about building genuine communion and solidarity, from which true mission naturally flows.

Education for justice does not always take the form of direct service learning, though I deeply support such programs. Sometimes, it means teaching students the importance of self-care or empowering them to imagine futures they never thought possible. True justice education expands horizons, fosters belonging, and nurtures the kind of hope that leads to lasting change. Justice, in these cases, means expanding the horizon of possibility. Justice may

mean creating space for students to envision a life beyond their assumed limitations, allowing them to explore new possibilities and pursue their passions with confidence. For Sister Mary Linscott, SNDdeN this was the true essence of education for Saint Julie. While it is significant that Julie trained teachers from the very start of her ministry, founded schools, developed teaching methods, and pioneered an effective educational philosophy, these accomplishments must be understood in light of her deeper motivation. Education was not merely one option among many for her, it was the inevitable and natural expression of her unwavering conviction that God is good. For Julie, God's goodness was not just an abstract belief but a lived experience. Educating for justice means helping our students recognize that God's goodness is present in their own lives first allowing them to encounter it personally. From that awareness, a natural response emerges: a desire to share this goodness with others and work toward a more just world.

Education in Notre Dame communities, whatever its form, whatever culture it may reflect, and at whatever level it may be, must have its roots in a deep sense of God as good, if it is to be faithful to its origins. While many religious orders in the past prioritized educating the elite, Saint Julie turned her attention to the poor, those whom society overlooked. She saw this as the true work of justice for her congregation. Within this mission, she left us a legacy: the centrality of God's goodness as the foundation of education, shaping students to become agents of good and builders of a more just society.

1. What if the law is not just? A Relationship of Autonomy and Prophetic Dissent

In this second section, I will explore what it means for a Catholic institution to embody justice, particularly when the circumstances around us seem to demand actions that may feel contrary to our sense of justice. We can view this reflection as part of a larger theological tradition, one that has engaged figures such as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and Martin Luther King, Jr., all of whom recognized that fidelity to the Gospel requires resisting unjust structures.

What if the law is unjust? In the United States, universities, including some Catholic universities, have historically served governments, providing research that advances national priorities, including military research and economic policies. Yet, Catholic institutions must chart a different course. Their mission is not to reinforce power but

to question it when necessary, advocating a vision of society rooted in human dignity rather than state interests.

This commitment to autonomy is crucial. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), a document governing the relationships between Catholic universities and the Church, states that: “Every Catholic University feels responsible to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works: for example it will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it,” (no. 34). This places our institutions in tension with systems that prioritize profit over people, war over peace, uniformity over diversity, exclusion over inclusion, inequality over equality, and economic expansion over ecological responsibility. Catholic schools must remain free to critique unjust policies and advocate for the Gospel’s radical vision of justice. Bergman (2011) describes how Catholic education has long been a site of both knowledge and resistance, challenging social norms that exclude or oppress. Similarly, Sokol et al. (2021) argue that civic engagement in Catholic schools is often at odds with political and economic interests, but this tension is necessary to maintain integrity. What we might call Saint Julie’s democratic vision, her unwavering belief that education is a fundamental right of all people by virtue of their humanity, was already radical in her own time, and it is today in the DNA of Notre Dame education. Julie carried her Christian logic far beyond the revolutionaries of her era, refusing to impose distinctions of class or status. Instead, she simply educated the human person as such.

Catholic schools are not neutral institutions; they are spaces where the Gospel’s vision of justice takes root in young hearts and minds, preparing them to build a more just and compassionate world.

“To win them and train them,” said Saint Julie. “If I have one ambition on earth, it is that.”

Her vision stood in stark contrast to the prevailing views of her contemporaries. Voltaire sought to limit education to the upper class; Rousseau believed the poor had no need for it, and others argued they had no time. Yet Julie defied the

traditions of great educators before her, choosing instead to go directly to the poor. She was not concerned with producing philosophers, orators, governors, scholars, gentlemen, or revolutionary citizens; her mission was the education of all. If she had any preference, it was for those most in need.

Notre Dame Catholic schools, too, must be willing to be a prophetic voice, even when it means going against the tide. A moral Catholic school must sometimes stand in dissent, advocating for those whom society ignores. This prophetic mission is not about rejecting all governmental collaboration but about ensuring that Catholic institutions remain committed to the truth of their faith, justice, and love, rather than power and convenience. Catholic schools, if they want to be just, are called to be places where new possibilities for a just world are imagined and cultivated.

2. If it is fair, it is not love

Justice, as the world defines it, is often reduced to balance, giving each their due. But Catholic justice is something deeper, something more radical. It is not only about ensuring fairness but about loving fiercely, about stepping into the lives of others with a willingness to heal, to advocate, and to transform.

Love, by its very nature, is unfair. It doesn’t follow the cold logic of justice, whether civil or religious, which insists that people get what they deserve, reward for the worthy, punishment for the guilty. Love refuses to play by those rules. It spills over the rigid boundaries humans have drawn to maintain order and control. It takes risks, steps into the unknown and dares what justice never could. And in those risks, something extraordinary happens, love awakens hidden strength, unleashes generosity, and transforms lives in ways no system of fairness ever could.

Humanity’s deepest growth, its ability to recognize the dignity and uniqueness of every person, doesn’t come from the strict application of justice. It comes from love. Not just any love, but the kind that is raw, unexpected, and wholly unearned. The kind that reveals God, who, as Nicholas Cabasilas puts it, is mad love for humankind.

Nowhere is this more powerfully seen than in the story of Hosea. He was the first prophet to compare God’s relationship with God’s people to that of a husband and wife, and he didn’t arrive at this metaphor by accident. He lived it. Hosea married Gomer, a woman who bore him three children and then repeatedly left him for other lovers. Time after time, he went after her, brought her home, and tried to

start again. But when she ran off once more, his patience snapped. This time, he confronted her. He laid out her betrayals, counted every wound she had inflicted on him, and then spoke the words that would end it all:

“She is not my wife, and I am not her husband.” (Hos 2:4)

This was it. The final judgment. Justice demanded that Gomer pay for what she had done. The law was clear: adulterous women were to be put to death (Lev 20:10). Hosea had every right to condemn her. His voice hardened as he declared: “I will punish her for the days she dedicated to Baal...” (Hos 2:15).

This is the kind of justice that Catholic education must cultivate, not a theoretical concept, but a force that moves people to act.

Then, everything changed. Instead of condemnation, he spoke words no one expected: “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.” (Hos 2:16) Punishment turns into pursuit. Judgment transforms into a second chance. Hosea, humiliated and heartbroken, does the unthinkable, he invites Gomer on a new honeymoon. No guarantees, no assurances that she won’t betray him again. Just love, given freely.

And that’s when Hosea realizes something even bigger: this is how God loves. The Lord doesn’t wait for people to repent before forgiving them. God doesn’t demand proof of change before showing mercy. God loves first, lavishly, recklessly, so that we can change. God’s love doesn’t fit into human ideas of fairness. It breaks the system. Divine love doesn’t calculate who is worthy; it simply gives.

To those who cling to the rules of justice, this love is scandalous. It’s irrational. It makes no sense. And yet, it is the very heartbeat of God. God’s love refuses to measure, refuses to withhold, refuses to conform to what is “fair.” It is excessive. It is relentless.

Saint Julie embodied this vision. In her letters, she spoke of justice not as a legal principle but as an expression of love. She called for education that did more than teach facts. It had to form people not caring for what the Sisters could get in return, or how many times they had to forgive and not give up.

Recently, Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), echoed

this, calling for a justice rooted in solidarity with our fellow brothers and sisters, in which no one is abandoned, it does not matter how broken our lives are.

Consider also the example of Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN. Sister Kathleen Harmon, SNDdeN of the Ohio province recently shared a powerful story about her final night. Sister Dorothy saw her killers outside her home. She knew what was coming. And yet, instead of hiding or fleeing, she stepped outside and did something astonishing; she invited them to dinner. “Come,” she said. “Have dinner with us.”

The next day, as they confronted her on the path, weapons ready, she met them not with fear but with blessing. She looked at them and recited the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” Then they took her life.

Sister Dorothy’s witness is a testament to justice as love in action. This is the kind of justice that Catholic education must cultivate, not a theoretical concept, but a force that moves people to act. It must inspire students to go beyond intellectual exercises and become people of love, people willing to change the world, however that may take shape for them: improving the conditions of their family, founding an NGO, entering politics, dedicating themselves to research on an overlooked issue simply because it matters, even if it generates no profit. Justice, when animated by love, is never passive. It is daring, disruptive, and transformative. This is the kind of justice the world needs.

Conclusion

Catholic education stands for a justice that goes beyond the scales. It calls for transformation, for radical love, for action in defense of the vulnerable. Catholic schools are not neutral institutions; they are spaces where the Gospel’s vision of justice takes root in young hearts and minds, preparing them to build a more just and compassionate world.

To be faithful to their mission, Catholic schools must resist the pressure to conform to power and instead embrace their role as prophetic institutions. Justice beyond the scale is a justice that loves, that acts, and that envisions a world where every person’s dignity is recognized and where education becomes a cornerstone of social renewal. ✱

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Notes:

“Let us always do our best with great simplicity of heart and mind.”

(Saint Julie Billiart, Letter 190)

The SNDdeN Commitment to Ecological Justice:

A Brief History

BY SISTER MARY ALICE MCCABE, SNDden

IN 2015 POPE FRANCIS WROTE his prophetic encyclical *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home). This was his first urgent call to all peoples calling attention to the devastating effects of climate change in which he wrote, "Mother Earth now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which the Creator has endowed her" (*Laudato Si'*, para. 2).

Pope Francis's urgent message calling for radical change in our use of fossil fuels and consumer habits was largely ignored here in the United States by the Church, State and the corporate world. His message, it appears, was and is a threat to those who have a vested interest in enterprises that are destroying the planet and who chose to deny climate change. Eight years later in 2023, Pope Francis repeated his message with even more urgency in *Laudate Deum*.

In 2021, congregations of women religious took on the task of bringing Pope Francis's urgent message to the people of God. We, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, got on board and formed our *Laudato Si'* Action Platform which exists to this day.

Our History of Care for the Earth

For the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, this is not a new issue or a new challenge. Care for creation has always been a concrete expression of our charism of proclaiming the goodness of the Creator. On July 15, 1795, Saint Julie Billiart wrote: "You will often be able to read in this great book of nature what grandeur there is to be discovered in it. But only those souls can find it who have the happiness of seeing God everywhere," (Julie, Letter 1). We have a history both in this country and across our global missions of caring for creation by organizing and struggling for ecological justice and denouncing the immoral abuse that we humans commit against the natural world and all living creatures.

From the U.S.:

KERMIT, WEST VIRGINIA: In 1976, our Sister Kathy O'Hagan, SNDdeN, with the support of Sister Mary Margaret Pignone, SNDdeN and Sister Gretchen Shaffer,

CSJ, founded the Big Laurel Learning Center in Kermit, West Virginia, a remote Appalachian town of 300 families most of whom were living in poverty. The Center which exists to this day as a ministry of faith, education and ecological justice has both a school and nature preserve. Retreats and summer camps offer teens and adults the opportunity to reconnect with Earth's biodiversity and to find God in the natural world. (For more information, see *Sowing Goodness*, Vol. 4, No. 2.)

Care for creation has always been a concrete expression of our charism of proclaiming the goodness of the Creator.

IPSWICH, MASSACHUSETTS: Notre Dame in Ipswich has a long and diverse commitment to caring for the land. In November 2005 the first Land Ethic was written by the Sisters of the former Ipswich Province who assumed the challenge "to preserve the integrity, sustainability and beauty of the land entrusted to our care." In 2013 the Sisters decided collectively to put 71.8 acres into conservancy restriction with the Greenbelt Land Trust, thus protecting it from development. The conserved area includes the Salt Marsh and surrounding woods.

In March of 2025, the membership of the U.S. East-West Province (which includes the former Ipswich Province) unanimously declared commitment to a revised Land Ethic which states that "we will evaluate all decisions about our lands and resources in the light of our commitment to promote the interconnectedness and integrity of all of God's creation." Currently one half of the 2-acre lawn on our Ipswich property is being transformed into a pollinator garden. The feasibility of installing a solar energy array on the other half of the property is being explored which will significantly reduce fossil fuel use.

Our Spirituality Center at Ipswich, currently led by Sisters Mary Boretti and Ellen Keane, SNDdeN, focuses on a creation spirituality that challenges an anthropocentric posture towards the natural world and fosters a

participation in the community of all living creatures. Programs take place within the natural landscape of our land which includes a labyrinth, a marsh overlook and Mary's Path through our community of oak trees.

Ipswich's Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center: Cuvilly's guiding principle is: "All life is sacred and the diversity of life is essential for the well-being of the planet." Founded over 40 years ago by Sister Pat Rolinger, SNDdeN, Cuvilly is a community of creation with a preschool, barn animals, pollinator-biodiversity gardens and regenerative vegetable farming. Cuvilly's ministry promotes ecological justice inspiring people of all ages, pre-school through adult, to explore their innate creativity and connection to all Earth's living creatures.

Cuvilly was also the site for the prototype of the 2005 African Notre Dame photovoltaic project for our Congolese and Nigerian missions. Cuvilly still has 15 functioning solar plates. In Congo and Nigeria, on 17 different sites, the photovoltaic systems now provide continuous and reliable electricity in rural villages, empowering schools, clinics and entire communities. Our Sisters operate and maintain the systems as they harvest sunlight to generate electricity. (See *Sowing Goodness*, Summer 2025, pg. 13. Our book, *Standing on Sacred Ground*, tells the history of the Ipswich land and includes data cited above.)

CARMEL, CALIF.: In 1930, Maria Antonia Field gave the magnificent Pacific Ocean-side 5-acre property, now known as Villa Angelica, to Sister Mary Angelica Cronin, SNDdeN on the occasion of Sister's Silver Jubilee. The two women had become lifelong friends when Maria Antonia was a boarder at the College of Notre Dame in San Jose, where Sister Mary Angelica was her teacher. Her intention was that it be a vacation house for the Sisters. Sister Michelle Henault, SNDdeN says: "To this day, we, Sisters of Notre Dame hold in trust the priceless gift of the Carmel property given to us ... and in the spirit of hospitality and with grateful hearts, we reverence and share the gift so generously given to us." (For more background, see the booklet: *This is Sacred Ground-The History of Villa Angelica and the House of Prayer*, Sister Michelle Henault, SNDdeN, editor.)

HALLMARKS OF A NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR LEARNING COMMUNITY: Sponsored ministries of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur throughout the United States are encouraged to declare commitment to the Hallmarks of a Notre Dame de Namur Learning Community. As of 2024,

Hallmark 3 was rewritten to reflect the current priorities articulated in the SNDdeN Chapter Calls and the papal encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*: "We educate for and act on behalf of justice, peace and care for all creation. We live and act with reverence for the Earth, putting into practice the principles of *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*." From *Laudato Si'*: "Environmental education needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care." (para. 10).

Our Sisters and co-workers around the world have defended ecological justice for many decades.

Global Advocacy

Our Sisters and co-workers around the world have defended ecological justice for many decades particularly in the global south: Brazil, Congo, Nigeria, Kenya. The story of our Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, who gave her life in defense of the Amazon forest and its people and creatures, is well known and documented and continues to inspire us, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and countless people in Brazil and around the world.

There are many other stories. Our African Sister farmers in Congo and Zimbabwe are developing and teaching regenerative agriculture; and in Brazil, our Sisters accompany and support the ongoing struggles of impoverished rural peoples seeking land rights and fishing rights. Agro-business, mono-culture soy farming, illegal shrimp breeding, and the vast destruction of the Amazon forest by greedy loggers and ranchers are but a few of the environmental disasters that our Sisters face and actively protest.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can contemplate the first line in the Introduction to the Land Ethic of the U.S. East-West Province that says clearly how care for creation is essential to our charism: "All of Creation is a manifestation of God's goodness. By honoring and protecting the land and its inhabitants entrusted to our care, we, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, remain faithful to our charism of proclaiming the goodness of God."

Our commitment to ecological justice is not a response to a passing concern but an expression of our charism and

our faith in a God who calls us to cherish and protect all creation. From Appalachia to Ipswich, from California to Brazil, Congo and beyond, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur continue to witness that care for Earth and care for those who are most vulnerable are inseparable. As the ecological crisis deepens, we recommit ourselves to living the Gospel through education, advocacy and reverence for our common home, trusting that even small, faithful actions can help heal our wounded world and inspire others to do the same. ✱



Sister Mary Alice McCabe, SNDdeN is co-chair of the Laudato Si' Action Platform of the U.S. East-West Province and a board member of the Cuvilly Arts & Earth Center.

Land Ethic

ALL OF CREATION IS A MANIFESTATION of God's goodness. By honoring and protecting the land and its inhabitants entrusted to our care, we, as Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, remain faithful to our charism of proclaiming the goodness of God.

Our Commitments:

As we continue to deepen our understanding and responsibility in making collective decisions regarding the lands entrusted to our care, we commit ourselves to the following:

1. To preserve in the present and in the future the integrity, sustainability and beauty of the lands entrusted to our care.
2. To be guided by economic, political, scientific, religious and ethical principles that promote reverence and justice for all Earth's bioregions as we make decisions regarding our lands.
3. To ensure that our decision-making processes include research and planning which focus as much on the future good of the land and the people, as it does on the present.
4. To evaluate all decisions with regard to our lands and resources in light of our commitment to promote the interconnectedness and integrity of all God's creation.
5. To ensure that we will leave our lands for future generations to be used in a way that reflects the Notre Dame de Namur mission and heritage.
6. To educate ourselves, our associates and our partners in ministry regarding the bioregions in which we live and to be well informed in modern sciences that will enrich our beliefs and perspectives.

Above is an excerpt of the Land Ethic of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur U.S. East-West Province.

The full text is available at:

snddeneastwest.org/resource/land-ethic-booklet

Reading the Signs of the Times

BY PATRICIA MCGUIRE

The following keynote address was delivered at the SNDdeN National School Leaders Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, November 2025.

IN 1897, WHEN “WOMEN AND THE MOMENT” joined forces to spark the founding of Trinity College, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who led the initiative were clearly reading the signs of the times. The United States, barely 100 years old, was three decades removed from its terrible Civil War, a landmark moment spurring profound social change in this country. A nascent women’s rights movement was pushing the idea that women deserved access to higher education, gaining traction, spurred by the founding of women’s colleges like Vassar, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Wellesley and Bryn Mawr. The Industrial Revolution was underway, driving social change, transforming the very nature of work and labor relations forever.

The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvelous discoveries of science; ... in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses...The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension; wise men are discussing it; practical men are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and rulers of nations are all busied with it. (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, para. 1)

Astutely reading the signs of the times at the end of the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII articulated Church teachings on the rights of workers as a matter of social justice, underscoring the teachings on social justice in this paragraph in his encyclical:

As regards the State, the interests of all, whether high or low, are equal. The members of the working classes are citizens by nature and by the same right as the rich...it would be irrational to neglect one portion of the citizens and favor another, and therefore the public administration must duly and solicitously provide for the welfare and the comfort of the working classes;

otherwise, that law of justice will be violated which ordains that each man shall have his due....Among the many and grave duties of rulers who would do their best for the people, the first and chief is to act with strict justice—with that justice which is called distributive—toward each and every class alike. (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, para. 32).

In this frothy climate of great social change at the end of the 19th century, Catholic women were seeking admission to the then-new Catholic University of America, but they were denied admission. Reading the signs of the times, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, in the U.S. serving for 50 years by then, saw a need for a Catholic college for women.

Trinity’s choice to remain faithful to our founding mission as a women’s college was far more radical than if we had gone coed—far from reinforcing tradition, our choice changed everything.

Easier said than done! Starting in March 1897, Sisters Julia McGroarty and Mary Euphrasia Taylor, SNDdeN conspired with Cardinal James Gibbons and the rector of Catholic University, Dr. Phillip Garrigan to launch the nation’s first Catholic college for women. In June, Cardinal Gibbons went so far as to write a congratulatory letter to Sister Julia, saying that Trinity College would “... relieve the University of the embarrassment of refusing women admission.” The SNDdeNs were moving quickly, buying land and securing articles of incorporation by August 20. But trouble arose when their intentions became public, generating opposition over the very idea of a college education for women.

It’s safe to say that as progressive as we might think of him today, Pope Leo XIII was not a fan of the idea of Trinity College when he first heard about it. His view of women’s rights and position in society was clear when he wrote in *Rerum Novarum* that, “women are not suited for certain

occupations...a woman is by nature fitted for home-work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family.”

Pope Leo XIII also held negative views about another educational practice that Catholic clerics generally viewed as “near occasion of sin” — the “amalgamation of the sexes,” or in other words, the dreaded “coeducation.” The Sisters had no intention of making Trinity coed, but a vicious right-wing monsignor at Catholic University, totally opposed to the whole idea of the new college for women, spread a rumor that the school would be coed, that the women would also take classes with the men at Catholic University. The rumors reached Pope Leo who was on the verge of condemning the entire effort.

But Sisters Julia and Euphrasia were persistent, and they had strong allies in Dr. Garrigan and Cardinal Gibbons, and the latter had great influence with the Vatican and the Pope. Many communications ensued, several visits to the cardinal in Baltimore and even a famous one-day round-trip to see the papal nuncio in Atlantic City.

Cardinal Gibbons advised the Sisters that they had to make a very strong case for the founding of Trinity to the Vatican directly. Sister Julia wrote to Cardinal Rampolla, the Vatican Secretary of State. In her letter she adamantly stated the “signs of the times:”

Education, as Your Eminence doubtless knows, is the cry of the age in America. Parents desire their daughters to be equally well informed with their sons, and with the independence characteristic of the country, when a lawful avenue of knowledge is closed to their daughters, they seek it for them through another avenue, plainly showing that if the Church does not supply this want of the age for our American Girls, the latter will continue to frequent Godless schools, and the charge will be repeated that the Church is opposed to the Higher Education of Women!

In her mention of “Godless schools,” Sister Julia was referring to the fact that Catholic women, denied admission to the then-new Catholic University of America, were enrolling at Columbian College, the precursor to George Washington University, where they had no religious instruction.

In an age without email or texting, no air travel or

cross-oceanic telephone service, the letters had to go by ship. Days and weeks dragged by. Finally, at the end of November, Cardinal Gibbons summoned Sister Euphrasia to his office in Baltimore where he told her that he received a letter from Cardinal Rampolla who said that he spoke to Pope Leo and “... in regard to the college to be established under his patronage at Washington by the Sisters of Notre Dame, he was satisfied with the explanation received and would no longer listen to disadvantageous reports about it.” With that cryptic message, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur had the green light to move forward with the founding of Trinity!

Across the subsequent decades, the SNDdeNs who led Trinity in its first century were fearless in their determination to educate women who would be servant leaders in their communities, teachers and doctors, lawyers and poets and even politicians, all equipped with the knowledge, skills and values to influence and create change for good.

In 1965, another landmark for the Catholic Church: the Second Vatican Council concluded with the timeless challenge of *Gaudium et Spes*:

...the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel....Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world ...Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy ... political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly. (*Gaudium et Spes*, para. 4).

In that same year, Trinity’s greatest president, Sister Margaret Claydon, SNDdeN gave a speech to the National Catholic Education Association in which she echoed *Gaudium et Spes* and the responsibility of educators to read the signs of the times:

We, the inheritors of a revolution must gird ourselves with the expertise and knowledge of the latest technology to become leaders of the revolution. One of the basic rights of free humans is to be informed truthfully about public events. Our students must be taught from the very beginning that this right

is theirs, that they have a duty to seek the facts, the right to investigate truth freely ... The analysis of controversial issues will arouse such interest, and no rigidity or timidity should interfere with such analysis. For the times in which we live, rigidity or timidity have no place. These times, these problems cry out for courage, for openness.

Sister Margaret's words were prophetic and powerful, and she led Trinity through an era of growth and change; but then, a time of disappointment and disillusion followed.

By the middle of the 1970s, something else was going on that threatened the very life of Trinity and so many similar small women's colleges. The men's colleges discovered that women were actually superior students, and coeducation spread rapidly across the nation. Along with that, Title IX in 1972 ensured that women would get equal opportunities at the formerly all-male schools, making them far more attractive for women. Women's colleges began disappearing rapidly.

As if that were not enough, for the Catholic women's colleges, an even more devastating phenomenon arose as a result of Vatican II. The changes in religious life especially for religious women meant that many left the convent, thus draining away the free labor of women (also known as "contributed services") that had built and sustained these places for nearly a century. The story of the Catholic women's colleges is stark: there were about 170 such institutions in 1970, and today there are about eight that continue to claim that identity; a number went coed, many closed. Reinventing these very small, old-line colleges into modern universities has been a great challenge, and along the way, we also tackled issues of access, diversity, equity and inclusion in ways that are very different from larger, wealthier, more prestigious institutions. Trinity, too, was suffering from severe enrollment declines and rising costs as more lay faculty and staff replaced the contributed services of the Sisters.

In 1989, I was the sixth person in eight years to sit in Trinity's president's office, the second lay president. I was 36, an alumna of Trinity, a Trinity trustee, a public interest lawyer who wound up fundraising for Georgetown Law School, but I had no executive experience. How did someone like me wind up in a place like this?

Trinity had hemorrhaged students through the 1980s, such that by 1989 there were only 300 full-time traditional women. What the Board didn't know—what I didn't know—

was that adult education and teacher education were sustaining the place. Why didn't we know that? Because like too many alums and trustees of Catholic colleges, we assumed that the "real college" was the full-time undergraduate liberal arts college and that anything else was ancillary, perhaps temporary, not really mission-centered.

The Board asked me to try on the presidency since they had run out of other ideas, and I had a big mouth about what should be happening. Fine, they said. "Fix it or close it!" was the command of the Sister who was board chair, Sister Regina Finnegan, SNDdeN when she handed me the keys to the president's office. Sister Regina was a great school leader, president of the Academy of Notre Dame in Villanova, and she spent several years trying to teach me how to be a good school leader.

The mission of access; the mission of justice. Talk about reading the signs of the times!

In the very first week I asked the admissions director how many students we had from D.C. Public Schools, and she answered quickly and directly, "Oh, none!" I asked her why, and she replied matter-of-factly, "Oh, THEY can't do the work here!" So, there it was: the elitism, the institutional racism, the back turned on our own backyard that had taken Trinity to the brink of closure. The failure to read "the signs of the times."

With the board we had strategic planning sessions in which alumnae trustees demanded that I work to "restore" the "golden era" of Trinity, which of course was impossible. I asked them about their vision for the college: if we wanted 1,000 full-time residential Catholic students, then we had no choice but to "go coed" and pray. But at that, one of the Sisters stood up and gave the galvanizing speech that changed the course of our history: "Why are we trying so hard to reclaim a population that is gone," she fairly cried out, "when there are thousands of women at our doorstep?" She went on, "The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur founded Trinity to provide access to a great higher education for women who did not have such access, and they are still out there—they may not look like us, but they are our mission!" The mission of access; the mission of justice. Talk about reading the signs of the times!

And so, we went out into our city and started welcoming

the women of Washington D.C., in much larger numbers, not only in adult and graduate studies but into our full-time undergraduate program. Typical of the white flight syndrome in Catholic urban schools, as we admitted more Black students our demographics changed quickly. Racial tensions grew. The faculty muttered, “Who let these students in here?” Alumnae became angry. An alumna fairly shouted at me in the middle of one meeting, “We don’t mind all this diversity, but are they Catholic?”

A Middle States reviewer wrote that Trinity’s choice to remain faithful to our founding mission as a women’s college was far more radical than if we had gone coed—far from reinforcing tradition, our choice changed everything.

We went through a decade of turmoil, conflict, fits and starts, doubt and setbacks. And then, we celebrated our Centennial and started construction on the first new building on our campus in 40 years—a sports center. We never had indoor sports facilities before, and some people wondered why that was our first project but soon, it became clear that the new facility not only helped enrollment, it also built a very positive relationship with our community in northeast D.C. We designed the facility to be open and welcoming to our neighbors.

At the groundbreaking ceremony, our main benefactor, an older gentleman who trended very conservative, took one look at all of the neighborhood children we had invited to the event and he leaned over to me and whispered: “You know this idea you have of welcoming the community into Trinity? It’s a good thing!” I knew we were on the right track.

Going into the 21st Century, Trinity at long last began to find peace within herself and pride in what we called the “paradigm shift.” We began to grow again, and we became far more confident in our ability to transform curricula and pedagogy to serve our students more effectively.

A Middle States team in 2006 wrote, “The team recognizes the impressive congruence of Trinity in 2006 with the original vision of Trinity’s founders in 1897 ... The team admires and commends the University’s rejection of the notion that paradigm shift means abandonment of historic mission ... Rather, we discover in the work and vitality of Trinity [today], a most obvious continuity with Trinity’s 110-year-old mission expressed with a renewed relevance and vigor.” (2006 Middle States Team Report for Trinity, p. 5)

Trinity in 2025 is a very different institution from the college I attended in the early 1970s, or the one that earlier generations of Trinity women remember. And yet, we carry

with us the exact same values and commitments to achieving social justice for the students we serve.

Today, our student body is 56% Black and 30% Hispanic, making Trinity both a Predominantly Black and Hispanic Serving Institution, one of only three private colleges in America with both designations. We are the only Catholic PBI. About 70% of our undergrads get Pell Grants or are undocumented. Our largest major programs now are in nursing and healthcare, business and education—but all students still must study and master the core knowledge and perspectives of the liberal arts.

How did we build this new model of a Catholic college devoted to access and justice for a broadly diverse student body? We certainly had a strong core philosophy and faith values in social justice, but we also have been remarkably pragmatic. We had solid strategic planning, with budgets always tied to goals. We had discipline in building academic programs that met the needs of our community. Nursing and healthcare became a very large emphasis because our city and local hospitals asked us to expand these programs given the large workforce needs in D.C.

We relied on these five building blocks as we managed through our years of change and growth:

1. **Mission:** Our planning always starts with mission, and from there we consider how to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities essential for long-term durability of this model.
2. Emphasis on **Student Success** through inclusive excellence. We learned, for example, that welcoming a large population of students who are first generation, who have many social and personal challenges as well as preparatory issues required us to develop a new model for academic advising and support that integrates personnel across the institution. We now call it the Center for Student Success. But we knew that a great advising and support system was not enough; we also had to help the faculty to develop new forms of pedagogy, some of which required a complete curricular overhaul. With a \$1 million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, our STEM faculty created our Inclusive Excellence program that has transformed science at Trinity and now includes all other disciplines.
3. **Programs and Career Pathways:** Student support and inclusive excellence were not enough. We had to have programs that ensured our students, coming to

Trinity from the economic margins, could leave Trinity with degrees and credentials that would propel them into positions of greater economic security. There is a real tension in American higher education between those who disdain the notion of a career-focused curriculum and those who say we should be all about jobs. At Trinity, we disagree with both sides of that argument. Of course we believe in and practice the beauty and durability of liberal learning every day, but we also know that it's manifestly unfair and unjust to our students who take on serious debt if we do not prepare them for the world of work. We have to do both, and employers want both.

4. Great **High School Partnerships** along with Corporate and Community Partnerships. We also came to the conclusion that we needed to help our local high schools do a better job of preparing students for the pathway into and through college, particularly when it comes to scientific, technological and healthcare pathways. So, we have embraced models of dual enrollment and early college with the D.C. Public Schools - we have more than 300 high school students on campus this fall, and that number will probably grow in the future.
5. Great benefactors to provide **Significant Scholarship Support**. To do all of this, we had to generate considerable support for students through scholarships and a financial aid program that is robust.

Along the way, we had to articulate a philosophy of racial justice that created a clear and compelling rationale for our work, supporting mission and challenging those corporate and community partners to join us in this work. We call that initiative Trinity DARE: Driving Actions for Racial Equity. We do not apologize for nor try to diminish this program in this age of anti-DEI fervor. Through this program we specifically challenge our corporate partners to open career pathways for our students—to make sure that Black and Hispanic women have seats at every table in town when it comes to hiring and employment in well-paying managerial and executive positions of influence, not just low-level worker slots.

Finally, the question that arises from time to time—less so today, but still a weaponized question at times—is simply this: “That’s all well and good, but are you still Catholic?” I always start my reply with that great line from Cardinal

James Hickey: We do what we do not because THEY are Catholic but because WE are Catholic.

Just weeks ago, our new pope, Leo XIV, refreshed our understanding of the history and contemporary urgency of social justice in his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* in which he wrote:

The acceleration of technological and social change in the past two centuries, with all its contradictions and conflicts, not only had an impact on the lives of the poor but also became the object of debate and reflection on their part. The various movements of workers, women and young people, and the fight against racial discrimination, gave rise to a new appreciation of the dignity of those on the margins of society. The Church’s social doctrine also emerged from this matrix. (*Dilexi Te*, para. 82)

**We do what we do not because
they are Catholic but because
we are Catholic.**

Dilexi Te demands that we recommit to solidarity with the poor and marginalized of our society. For Catholic educational institutions, this means radical inclusion of those who have been denied the advantages of educational opportunities that others have easily accessed. Pope Leo XIV writes, “Since ancient times, Christians have understood that knowledge liberates, gives dignity, and brings us closer to the truth. For the Church, teaching the poor was an act of justice and faith.” (*Dilexi Te*, para. 68). Saint Julie Billiart surely understood this implicitly when she founded her order with the primary mission to educate poor girls. Pope Leo goes on:

For the Christian faith, the education of the poor is not a favor but a duty. Children have a right to knowledge as a fundamental requirement for the recognition of human dignity. Teaching them affirms their value, giving them the tools to transform their reality ... Catholic schools, therefore, when they are faithful to their name, are places of inclusion, integral formation and human development. By combining faith and culture, they sow the seeds of the future, honor the image of God and build a better society. (*Dilexi Te*, para. 72).

Pope Leo's words here echo the 1991 instructions of Pope John Paul II to Catholic higher education in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic University ... Every Catholic University feels responsible to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works: for example it will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it. (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, para. 34).

Trinity today lives this mission of our Church in all that we do. But we are immensely challenged by a political culture that actively and with some degree of malice disparages the works of mercy and solidarity, denigrates the whole idea of social justice, and that has said, directly to colleges and universities, that caring for equity and inclusion is wrong and possibly illegal. Trinity's mission is stronger and more durable than the political winds of the moment.

In all of this, we continue to draw inspiration and guidance from the mission and example of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Even as those courageous Sisters dared to confront their opposition in 1897—smartly, politely, but firmly—so, too, Trinity today will continue to give our witness to a world that needs more light, less heat, more grace, less judgment, more solidarity, less opprobrium, more charity and hope for a better, more just and peaceful future. ✱



Patricia McGuire is the president of Trinity Washington University.

Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

- » Dignity of all human persons
- » Call to family, community and participation
- » Subsidiarity – empowerment of local communities
- » The common good – that all people may flourish and reach their full potential.
- » Universal destination of goods – the Earth's resources are for all.
- » Rights of workers and dignity of work
- » Preferential option for the poor and vulnerable
- » Solidarity and social justice
- » Care for Creation



For additional information on Catholic Social Teaching, visit:

Leadership & Spirituality

Friendship as a Guiding Principle for Leadership

BY SISTER BARBARA BARRY, SNDNEN

JULIE BILLIART AND FRANÇOISE BLIN DE BOURDON met in a way that is very familiar to the young people in our schools today. In 1794, in the middle of the French Revolution, Julie, age 43 and seriously ill at the time, needed constant care. Françoise, 38, and an aristocrat, visited Julie as an act of charity. Though Françoise was originally repulsed by Julie's physical infirmities, she was still drawn to this holy woman and continued to visit her. As their conversations developed, each saw the good in the other, and eventually Françoise asked Julie to be her spiritual guide or mentor. At the time Françoise was discerning a vocation to the Carmelites. Soon after these initial meetings, Françoise needed to return home to care for her father. The two then began corresponding by letter, and their relationship deepened into a friendship rooted in their shared belief in the goodness of God.

In time, Françoise returned to Julie and thus began a decades-long relationship that gave birth to the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Rooted in a deep faith and belief in God's goodness, they encouraged each other, held each other up in difficult moments, and discerned together the future of the Congregation. We are blessed to have hundreds of their letters in which we can read of not only the spiritual and emotional support they gave to each other and the earliest Sisters but also the practical details and advice they offered to those in our earliest ministries.

The relationship between Julie and Françoise shaped the early days of the Congregation and established the values that are still lived out today. Seeing the world through the lens of God's goodness influenced how they accepted their everyday realities of war, poverty and misunderstandings within the Church and civil society. Because they trusted in God's providence, they exuded a joy and a liberty of spirit that showed itself in the way they responded to suffering and difficulties and made decisions about the living out of the Notre Dame mission. Early in our history, they had to make risky ministerial decisions,

leaving their country and diocese, to be faithful to God's call and the mission of the Congregation. And so what does all of this mean for us today?

Encounter leads to relationship.
Relationships birth empathy and
compassion. Compassion leads to
peace, and isn't that God's desire
for all of us?

Pope John Paul II is said to have stated, "affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality." Julie and Françoise are examples of this truth. Good work comes from good relationships. A solid friendship is rooted in respect for one another, an ability to speak truthfully to one another, and a willingness to listen deeply to one another.

Each one of us is created in the image of God, and we spend our lives growing into our best selves. The relationships we develop with others help us to see what we can become. Reflecting with another who truly cares about us invites us to look deeply into our own heart to unlock the potential we each hold. Our family relationships, especially with parents and siblings, may have the strongest influence on us, but it is not uncommon for us to experience invitations to growth from our colleagues at work. It may start with something as simple as helping us find the lunchroom on our first day of work. Before long, we are sharing professional expertise with each other. Then there are those days when we simply need "a shoulder to cry on." Julie and Françoise were this kind of support for one another. When Julie had a very difficult meeting with a bishop, which led to her to make the hard decision to leave Amiens, Françoise was waiting for her in the garden to be a listening ear and a source of support as they faced a future in a new country. When there was a group of Sisters who did not

agree with the way Julie was leading the Congregation, Julie and Françoise discerned together the action of the Holy Spirit for the Congregation. When a priest tried to take over the governance of the early Congregation, together they discussed together how to remain faithful to what God was asking of them. When a particular school needed materials or food for the children and the Sisters, there always seemed to be some benefactor who supported their work because of the relationship they had with Julie or Françoise.

It is also important to consider how we give to a relationship. Do we give our time to others? Do we offer an encouraging word when it is needed? Do we share the knowledge or experience that has blessed our own lives? This is what creates community.

Often, when thinking about our relationships with others, we imagine ourselves on the receiving end of others' care. Most of the time, we are grateful for the ways we are supported by others. Sometimes we come to the end of our

day and realize (or not) that we missed the mark or were closed to what was offered to us. In those moments, we can ask forgiveness, revisit the moment and listen differently, and rejoice in being a community. It is also important to consider how we give to a relationship. Do we give our time to others? Do we offer an encouraging word when it is needed? Do we share the knowledge or experience that has blessed our own lives? This is what creates community.

One of the most significant days in my ministerial experience was also the most tragic. Three of our students were killed in a car accident on the way to school. There are no words that convey the grief of those days, and yet what was spoken of most often was the experience of community (aka deep friendship) that was evident everywhere and with everyone. Because we were already in relationship with each other, the words and actions of those days, weeks and months held us all up in hope and peace. Each responded with the gifts they had to offer the community: leading the community in prayer, reaching out to the families of the girls who were killed, planting a memorial garden, and even the maintenance staff went to every store in the neighborhood and bought every box of Kleenex to bring back to the school!

Encounter leads to relationship. Relationships birth empathy and compassion. Compassion leads to peace, and isn't that God's desire for all of us? ✨



Sister Barbara Barry, SNDdeN directs the Congregational Mission Office of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Keeping Dignity at the Forefront in the Age of AI

BY SARA MAENNLE

“IT’S HERE, SO WE MIGHT AS WELL EMBRACE IT.”

This was my takeaway from a weekend workshop that I attended a few years ago at the County Office of Education. Educators were invited to the workshop with the intention of learning more about AI and how it was going to be influencing the classroom as we move forward. The keynote speaker was very clear: AI is not going away. Educators need to know how to use it in an effort to support students. In fact, the speaker made a reference to how the “World Wide Web” of the 90s was intimidating and scary in its infancy. Artificial intelligence needs to be understood, embraced and used — after all, our students are going to use it whether we like it or not.

Every interaction is an opportunity to affirm another person’s worth.

This mindset actually gave me quite a bit of comfort. Two things were happening at once for me. I gained understanding that I was not alone in the field of education in not really understanding AI and its complexities, and I was also not alone in pioneering ways to work with it, rather than against it. Seeing AI as a useful tool was not a mindset that I had experienced. I was now surrounded by men and women in the field of education who were given “permission” to see AI as another useful tool for ourselves and our students.

Fast forward to today. As part of the administration of Notre Dame Elementary, a Preschool, Kindergarten to 8th grade school of about 250 students, I have found myself chugging alongside AI in understanding how to use it. I have supported my teachers, parents and students in using AI but not overusing AI. There is, indeed, a fine line. I can ask ChatGPT anything. And so can my students. The difference is understandable: I can use AI as a guide, whereas students are far too tempted to use it as their answer.

Because of this, our school, along with schools across the world, has had to update our academic policies to include guidelines on plagiarism from AI that we did not see coming. Essentially, our youth have been given the keys to the kingdom, and it is up to educators to constantly change the locks to prevent overuse.

I have become comfortable, both professionally and personally with AI. I have given myself permission to use it, to embrace it as I was invited to when I went to the workshop a few years ago. Why am I comfortable with it? It is not because I use it all day, every day. It is not because I have found great advantages by using it. It is because I know its limitations and how un-human it is. Allow me to explain.

A few weeks ago, I joined a zoom presentation that was organized by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur: Magnifica Humanitas: The Age of AI through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching. The title alone had me hooked. As a professional who is tasked with “teaching the children what they need to know for life,” I will always pause when given the opportunity to learn more about how to provide a teaching and learning environment for students and families in today’s world. By remembering my core, the Hallmarks, and their roots in Catholic social teaching, I am able to remain focused on my purpose.

While it may not be appropriate to have a “favorite” Hallmark, I can confidently say that mine is Hallmark 2: “We Honor the Dignity and Sacredness of Each Person.” Dignity. Dignity. This is a word that has, for me, become a lifestyle. Throughout my day, I will pause and ask myself if my actions, policies, decisions or words are dignified. In critical conversations with staff, I remind them that they will always be treated with dignity and respect. When I mediate an issue with students, I remind them that they need to listen to each other with dignity and respect. When managing parent concerns, I start the conversation by letting all parties know that we will navigate our concerns with dignity in mind. Indeed, when my own adult children ask for advice, I use the guide rails of dignity to help drive decision making.

Knowing that Pope Leo XIV wrote his encyclical with a profound concern for the dignity of the human person in an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, I was immediately curious. The connection I have always experienced between my faith and my vocation as an educator became even stronger as I reflected on his words. I came away with an even deeper appreciation for what it means to possess dignity, to live with dignity, and to ensure that others are always treated with dignity.

Artificial intelligence is here to stay; however, I believe

that we need to focus on the word artificial. The human connection that students receive from their teachers cannot be replaced by AI: the hug, the side glance of “get back to work, please”, the comforting smile, the extra food on the day when a student forgot their lunch at home. Human dignity, human connection and human value will always usurp the supposed power of AI.

Human dignity, human connection and human value will always usurp the supposed power of AI.

Hallmark 2, “We Honor the Dignity and Sacredness of Each Person,” reminds me daily that leadership is not measured by efficiency but by encounter. Every interaction is an opportunity to affirm another person’s worth. Every policy should reflect respect for the human person. Every difficult conversation should leave someone knowing they have been heard, even when agreement is not possible.

While AI may be influencing the future of education, it can never replace the human spirit that depends on dignified relationships with self and others. As a Catholic leader in education my mission and my charism will never be eroded by AI. I will continue to know that prioritizing dignity will be my foundation. ✱



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7 Hallmarks of a Notre Dame de Namur Learning Community

1. We proclaim by our lives even more than by our words that God is good.
2. We honor the dignity and sacredness of each person.
3. We educate for and act on behalf of justice, peace and care for all creation.
4. We commit ourselves to community service.
5. We embrace the gift of diversity.
6. We create community among those with whom we work and with those we serve.
7. We develop holistic learning communities which educate for life.

Leading in Times of Loss

BY CATHY MOTTAU

IN JULY 2016, I BEGAN MY ROLE AS THE PRINCIPAL of Moreland Notre Dame School (MND), and as I reflect on my journey, the saying, “Ignorance is bliss” could not be more fitting. I had little idea of what would come my way, both professionally and personally. Professionally, I was stepping into a place where my predecessor was beloved (rightfully so); my Assistant Principal had applied for the principal’s job and had been passed over in a way that made it more painful, and the community was anxious about potential changes. Therefore, I needed to walk a fine line between making changes and honoring the past.

As I moved into my second year and began finding my footing, the community and I were learning to trust each other. Then, my world was broken by the death of my son, Alexander, in February 2018. At the end of that school year, I had to decide whether or not to return to MND. After reflection and prayer, I returned to work with a renewed understanding of the importance of leading with compassion, particularly in moments of celebration and loss. My experiences have taught me that leadership is not just about guiding others through everyday tasks but also about being present with them in their most vulnerable moments.

The Role of Compassion in Leadership

After deciding to return to MND, it became important to me that this be a place of compassion, empathy and, most importantly, an understanding that we are all human. As the leader of the community, I knew that if I wanted these qualities to be present, I had to model them myself. Allowing others to share their pain, worries and stress creates an environment where everyone feels free to be themselves while simultaneously giving others the grace and care we desperately need ourselves. Our human experience is made better when we have deep connections with others, and compassion is the bridge that connects us with those we serve. In a Catholic school, where our values are deeply rooted in the teachings of Christ, compassion must permeate every interaction, decision and policy. It is through compassion that we demonstrate the love of Christ, especially during times of joy and sorrow.

In leading with compassion, we acknowledge the human experience in its entirety. We celebrate achievements and milestones, recognizing the hard work

and dedication that brought them about. Simultaneously, we mourn losses, providing a space for grief and reflection. By doing so, we create an environment where every member of our school community feels seen, heard and valued.

Leading in Times of Celebration

Celebrations are opportunities to reinforce our shared values and build a sense of community. As a leader, it is essential to approach these moments with intentionality and a deep understanding of their impact on our school culture. Celebrations are not just about recognizing accomplishments; they affirm the collective effort and individual contributions that made those accomplishments possible.

Leadership is not just about guiding others through everyday tasks but also about being present with them in their most vulnerable moments.

Whether it is an academic achievement, a sports victory or a milestone in a student’s personal growth, each celebration is an opportunity to uplift our community and remind everyone of the importance of their unique gifts. Our celebrations of faith allow us to recognize and honor our good God and all that God provides us. In the words of Saint Julie Billiart, “How good is our good God.” Our community celebrations are evidence of and praise to our good God.

Leading in Times of Loss

Loss is an inevitable part of life, and as a leader, it is crucial to approach it with sensitivity and compassion. After the death of Alex, I came to realize in a more profound and real way how grief and loss are feelings that everyone deals with daily. This has greatly shaped how I support others through their grief. In a school community, losses can take many forms—whether it’s the death of a loved one, a family hardship, or even the disappointment of unmet expectations. Each of these experiences requires a compassionate and empathetic response.

At MND, we strive to create a supportive environment where individuals feel safe expressing their grief. It is in these moments that our commitment to the dignity and worth of every person truly comes to life. This begins at the beginning-of-the-year retreat and continues throughout the year. As a community, we are intentional about giving grace and showing compassion in each of our interactions. We are also vulnerable and share with each other when we might be struggling with something, allowing our colleagues and community to support us in our time of need. This requires time and the cultivation of relationships.

Each celebration is an opportunity to uplift our community and remind everyone of the importance of their unique gifts.

Creating a Culture of Compassion

The culture of a school is shaped by the values and behaviors modeled by its leadership. At MND, we work diligently to cultivate a culture where every person is valued and respected, where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth, and where compassion is the foundation of all interactions. This applies to staff, students and families alike.

This culture of compassion begins with the leadership team and extends to every member of our school community. It involves open communication, mutual respect and a commitment to understanding the unique circumstances of each individual. By fostering an environment where people feel safe to be themselves—knowing they will be met with kindness and support—we create a community that can navigate both celebrations and losses with grace and unity.

The Impact of Compassionate Leadership

The impact of compassionate leadership extends beyond the immediate responses to celebration and loss. It shapes the long-term culture and ethos of our school. When leaders model compassion, it encourages others to do the same. This ripple effect can be seen in the way students treat each other, how faculty collaborate and how the entire community responds to challenges.

Compassionate leadership also fosters resilience. In times of loss, it helps individuals and communities to heal and find strength in one another. In times of celebration, it deepens the joy and reinforces the bonds that hold us together. Ultimately, leading with compassion is about recognizing our shared humanity and responding with love, patience and understanding.

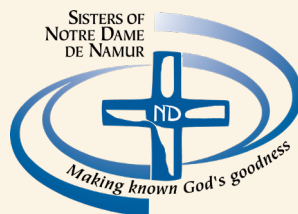
Conclusion

Leading through both celebration and loss requires a balance of strength and vulnerability, of guiding and being present. As the principal of MND, my experiences have taught me that leadership is not just about managing tasks but about nurturing the souls of those entrusted to my care. Through compassionate leadership, we can create an environment where every person feels valued, supported and empowered to thrive, no matter what life may bring.

Having Saint Julie, Françoise Blin de Bourdon, and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur as guides gives me the necessary confidence, faith and trust to continue making MND a place where compassion and celebration go hand in hand. ✱



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