

# Taking Care of Our Common Home

## What might St. Madeleine-Sophie Barat's vision be?

This speech is being given as part of the 6th World Conference of School Leaders, which also includes directors of the Sacred Heart family's training centers. The Covid-19 pandemic has made us be creative and we decided to meet by videoconference.

The theme of this conference, which was decided at least two years ago, is surprisingly topical, since it comes from the *Laudato Si'* encyclical by Pope Francis. This is an encyclical that calls on the men and women of these times, which calls on us all to "take care of our common home", of our planet that is imperiled on all sides, and to thus take care of our humanity and take care of ourselves. The Pope pleads for a holistic ecology that looks at the question of ecology in its entirety from all aspects: human, spiritual, political and economic.

We will therefore examine this question from the point of view of our various responsibilities within our establishments. For those of us whose mission it is to educate the young people who will be responsible for tomorrow's world, and whose mission it is to provide support to adults, the Pope's question is of primary concern to us.

My remarks however will be very limited compared to the Pope's. We are not going to be reflecting on our planet's current situation (others will do that better than I can) but that which exists in our schools and our training centers. We are going to consider how the educational tradition handed down by St. Madeleine Sophie Barat (MS) can enlighten us and guide us, so that we look after our institutions and the education that we are promoting, and so that the young people and adults trained in our establishments, and ourselves as well, take action towards a comprehensive ecology.

What would M-S make of "taking care"? What advice would she give us? Can we reinterpret her primordial instincts towards "training young people in the spirit of worship and repair" in light of the encyclical? How can we, the Sacred Heart educators, put integral ecology into practice while still being faithful to Sophie's intuition?

I planned to consider this in 6 phases, which I will explain as we go.

## 1. Our Common Home

In her letters, Saint Madeleine-Sophie Barat was constantly preoccupied with her "homes". She asks the sisters to whom she writes: "How is the train running at your house?" Or: "What's the news of your little family". When I first started spending time with the congregation (in 1976!), every time I met a new sister she would ask me: "**Are you one of the children who lives in our homes?**"

Home is therefore an intrinsic part of our Sacred Heart family's vocabulary. And although few of you may use the term, I am sure that, like me, you are touched by the warmth of the

expression and that the meaning behind it is precisely the one you want for your establishments. You want them to be an attractive place to live, where everyone knows one another and that you think of as home. This is admittedly a nice way of saying the homes have a distinct personality and a family identity, and all the more so as there are now Sacred Heart homes all over the world.

So we can consider our establishment or our training center to be our common home. And of course look at our international network as well as our great common home.

For M-S, the home is both the people who live there (the students and the sisters) and the buildings themselves. For both M-S and Pope Francis, the home cannot be separated from those who live there. A home that is unsanitary and polluted seriously affects the lives of its inhabitants. MS thought likewise. Having grown up in Joigny, a small community nestled among the hills of Burgundy in a land of vineyards, MS maintained a lifelong love and respect for nature and animals. Throughout her life, Madeleine-Sophie sought proper **homes that were appropriate to their educational mission**. They needed to be spacious and preferably well-situated in the fresh air of the countryside on top of a hill, for example, yet without being too far from a city. In her view, and as the Pope reiterates in his encyclical, **everything is interconnected**: the quality of the sisters' and the students' spiritual and intellectual life depends on the quality of their environment. "Take good care of them," she said. "Give them to drink when it's hot and let them taste fruit" (in 1837, to Mother Eugenie Audé). "Being a child of the home" thus means a lot... It means living in a safe and secure environment where everyone is known and recognized: parents, children, young people, educators, teachers, directors, administrators, maintenance staff and multiple departments.... a supportive and protective place where you can take your time growing up.

In M-S's time, the resident boarding students lived in the same house as the sisters although the sisters lived in spaces specially set aside for them. **Living together** in the same house allowed the sisters to develop a **holistic education** which, in addition to class and study schedules, included leisure time, games, parties and prayer, of course, and liturgical celebrations.

Our Christian faith tells us that God has made his home among us, he lives on our land and he lives in our homes. There is something sacred about our homes, something precious because they house our lives, human lives, stories. Our Sacred Heart homes provide shelter to ever-growing humanity. It is therefore critical to be good stewards.

## 2. Work on Both your Sanctification and Your Neighbor's

As I was preparing this presentation and wondering if M-S had ever spoken about taking care and if so, how she talked about it, I was quite taken to find that Madeleine-Sophie frequently repeated in our first Constitutions, which she wrote in 1815, the following advice: "**Work on both your sanctification and your neighbor's.**" This expression is repeated so often in all Our

Constitutions, but especially in the part that deals with boarding schools, that it deserves to be examined.

We must work BOTH on OUR sanctification and on that of our NEIGHBOR. Almost all the words in this sentence are problematic. Work... so there is something to be done that involves effort, a learning process... but SANCTIFICATION... How should that be understood today? The word "sanctification" is related to the word saintliness. M-S does not say be saintly... but work to become it... sanctification supposes an action that takes place over time... Become saints, get closer to God or let God get closer to us. Open ourselves up to a deeply profound dimension of our humanity. We intuitively understand that this may particularly concern nuns who have dedicated their lives to God. But does it have something to say to us, the Sacred Heart educators, even if you're not a believer? Well, I believe it does if we understand sanctification as a path that leads us ever deeper, to our essential nature. A path that recognizes transcendence, not knowing, is at the core of our humanity. There are radical questions at the core of our lives (Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why is there something rather than nothing?) These questions open us to a mystery, to a transcendent dimension of our humanity. For M-S it is impossible to really educate if we ignore this divine dimension that is at the core of our world and at the core of our humanity.

So, if you don't mind, let's consider for the moment that "sanctification" means to gradually improve oneself, to make progress little by little by opening ourselves up more and more to God at the core of our lives, and of the lives of those who are entrusted to us... Who is called to make progress in this way: US and THE ONE NEXT TO US. The neighbor, which is to say the one, the one who is close to me, to whom I am close, in other words: our students, the adults whom we train, our colleagues at work, our students' parents, all the people we meet... Madeleine Sophie associates and links our personal growth and that of those we are responsible for educating.

I must admit that it was from taking the plane and hearing the same safety instructions over and over again that I was led to pay more attention to this very important advice from MS. In a plane we are told that in the event of depressurization we must first put the oxygen mask **on ourselves** before trying to put it **on our neighbor** (the one next to you!) Be he our baby or our old parent. Start by putting the mask on yourself... **Start with yourself**... it's a matter of common sense ... it seems simple ... but taken by emotion, even panic, are we so sure that we can take the step back necessary to calmly put on our mask and, only then, put it on the person we love?

Aren't we in a similar situation today? Although we have to teach and train, in an ever more globalized, interconnected and complex world, whereas we, 21st century humanity, have just suffered an incredible humiliation... that a tiny virus has disrupted our lives, disrupted the world so drastically that we will undoubtedly still be recovering many years from now. Our common home is like a plane in mid-flight in which there is suddenly no air ... and we knew long before Covid-19, that our educational work was already being challenged by the complexities of the world, and advances in science and technology that raise crucial issues in the areas of the environment and the earth's ecology, but also human ecology. We are faced

with concerns about anthropological choices, and extremely difficult and complex issues of ethical choices.

So how can we work for both our own growth and that of the young and old people who are entrusted to our care? In other words: **How do we take care of ourselves so as to be able to take care of those whose care is entrusted to us?**

I think it would be very helpful if we took the time to ask ourselves three questions.

### 3. Three questions about Taking Care

These questions come directly to me from the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola. M-S was trained by her brother and by her Jesuit friends in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. M-S often refers to St. Ignatius in her letters and her notes in the Journal de Poitiers.

These questions are a simple translation of the fundamental approach proposed in the Exercises. I received them from a Jesuit friend with whom I had the good fortune to work, Father Denis Delobre, (deceased three years ago). I suggest them to you as a possible way to “work on both our own sanctification and our neighbor’s”? I hope these three questions will enrich how we interpret Sophie's advice.

The three questions are as follows:

- What did I do?
- What did it do to me?
- What do I do with it?

As you can see, these questions all explore an action, and they can be applied to any type of action: a course, a training session, a management team meeting, a meeting with parents, a colleague, a chance encounter, etc.

So these are questions that we ask ourselves after the fact, sort of evaluation questions. The first two ask about something that has already happened and is therefore in the past, while the last deals with the present and the future.

Let's take them one by one.

**What did I do?** This is a question that demands an objective answer and involves our memory. I'm trying to objectively remember and even write down what I did: I arrived in the classroom (or in my office, or ...) in such a way, I said this, I was interrupted by X, Y or Z, etc. Answering this question means taking a step back and looking at what happened and how I acted, **without any judgment**, in the most factual and objective way possible. This first step is not so simple, it requires a kind of inner release, an open availability, to collect the facts without judging myself, without judging them, without judging the protagonists. It is only then, when I have exhausted this objective repetition that I move on to the second question.

**What did it do to me?** Now this about recognizing what happened within me, as objectively as possible, and still from an observational distance, and how I was **affected** by what

happened. Recognizing the **emotions** that may have arisen in me: anger, fear, humiliation, joy, admiration, astonishment, incomprehension... To try to recognize these emotions as honestly as possible. And to then **go beyond the emotions** (which are like a surface movement), to make myself aware of the underlying movements: Did that hurt me? Or did it make me feel good? Did it give me life? Or did it sap my energy? Please note **that it is not at all a question of passing judgment**. For example, it's not a question of saying "it's good" or "it's bad", but of honestly and deeply feeling the inner movement produced inside us. At that point, we're at an entire different level of depth. We're no longer only at the level of the **emotions** (surface movements) but at the level of **motions**... which is to say at the level of fundamental movements, which set in motion the essential energies of life and death within us...

**What do I do with it?** With this question we're changing register. We're moving **from observation to a decision**. Having taken the time to consider the answers to the first two questions, I am aware of what these findings are encouraging me to do, change or transform, or on the contrary to continue and to deepen what I was already doing. This can be a tiny decision or a much more drastic one depending on what it's dealing with.

And so we make progress in our practice, in our understanding of those we work with. We don't make superficial decisions under the influence of our emotions, but only after taking the time to reflect and weigh the consequences of our decision, while being attentive to the fundamental movements within us. By making a decision, we commit our intelligence and our freedom to a renewed, transformed and converted action. This is caring that transforms. I can also offer these questions I'm asking myself for my own personal growth, to young people or to people in training.

#### 4. A Heart for Thinking

These three questions call on our **memory** (remembering what I did), on our **body** (emotions resonate in the body and are perceived in the body) and on our **will** (I decide what I want to do). What constitutes their unity? What intimately connects them? This is **the heart**. The Bible tells us that **God gave man a heart to think** (Sirach or Ecclesiastes 17.6). The heart is a vital, hidden, secret center where everything converges and from where everything starts. There is another name for our **interiority** towards which these three questions converge: what do I feel, how does it affect me deep inside, in my heart and not just in my body, and outwardly towards effective, transformative action. The heart gives meaning, it is fundamentally **intelligent**. Intelligent because it allows us both to **reread** (what did I do?) and to **connect**, connect (make the connection) what I did and what it did to me in order to draw important consequences for my life, for my way of acting (for example my way of teaching such and such a notion, or answering such a question), for my way of relating to myself and to others. The heart condenses love and intelligence within itself. When Madeleine-Sophie chooses the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart, she directs our education towards the person of Jesus, as both model and inspiration. Jesus doesn't act on a superficial

impulse, he's moved from within, from the most secret part of his heart, by the radical love that binds him and reconnects him to his Father.

Taking the time for these three questions allows us to take care of our common home starting from the basics. Our answers to the multiplicity of questions, to the difficulties that we face today will not come from a skin-deep, superficial reaction, from our emotions, but they will come from the depths of our intelligent hearts. This sort of working on one's self, or with oneself, and with others is also very powerful if it's practiced by the entire educational community, if the entire Body takes the time to ask itself these questions while it moves from I to WE.

## 5. Going from I to WE

We could take up the previous three questions much more systematically, but not alone this time, not individually, but together. A management team, a set of teachers in the same field or the same class, a training team, the educational community as a whole, a board of directors or a financial council, a secretariat team... All these groups and many others could take the time together to ask themselves these three questions:

- What did WE do?
- What did it do to US?
- What do WE do with it?

In an educational community, in any team whatsoever, there is an **interdependency of the members**. What one does affects the whole. If we don't come together to talk about it, to evaluate, to try to adjust to one another, we are not building **the body as an interdependent whole**. We're not creating the common home. I may, in fact, have decided for myself, and feel that I'm making progress, and being well within one's rights is very important but it's not enough. You still have to adjust to the whole, so there's no doubt that **I'm giving up something for the common good**. We are building common educational projects that require constant readjustments that we must decide on together.

The three questions can serve as a framework for meetings where every member of the group can be listened to, question by question, so that the group, as such, must not only think objectively, but also make room for emotions, and can move on from emotions to motions. The group can understand itself as being one person, who feels, acts and decides. To do this, we can't proceed too quickly, wanting to find an immediate solution, but must allow for periods of silence and proceeding in stages. All the work of listening and talking consists of **seeking a consensus** so that the decision can be implemented insofar as possible, by everyone. The particularly delicate moment is the second step: **What did it do to us?**

This can be done in several rounds

1. Each person initially expresses what it felt like to them, and everyone else listens without interrupting

2. Having heard what each has to say, and after a time of personal reflection, everyone can say what he/she felt from the group, how he/she was personally affected by what he/she heard and where he/she feels life is headed?
3. Then everyone can express what they feel could be decided, while still practicing respectful listening
4. Then what direction each person feels the group is heading
5. And finally the decision or decisions that the group makes with the agreement of the person in charge, if there is one.

This course of action runs contrary to our hectic lives and the lack of time we're always complaining about. It doesn't have to be constantly practiced, but enough to maintain the body's unity, and its common spirit in particular. What do we want together? What decision do we make that will bring life, a good life that is rejuvenating and nurturing. In fact, in doing this together, for ourselves, we're putting into practice the four calls of the 2016 General Chapter:

**Live more humanely in the radical lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth**, as long as we take the time to have in-depth meetings to seek solutions together to the difficulties we're facing, creating spaces for dialogue and listening, without judgment, but in a spirit of openness to the rich diversity of gifts that comprises the group.

**Keep silent**: this silence that is absolutely essential for listening and reflection, which allows us to move from the head to the heart, which allows us to reflect within us, to ponder within us what we have heard, what we have felt, our emotions, and the motions even more so. To make us detect sources, detect new ideas and open ourselves up to the extraordinary (which is to say, to what we've never heard before) to what the other is expressing, either verbally or non-verbally.

**Reach new frontiers**: discover how what we thought impossible can become possible, such as someone we never thought we could collaborate with, an event we never thought we could organize or a change we never thought we could make... With the power of consensus that creates solidarity, which circulates life between the members of the body, something unexpected, something good can happen that gives energy and momentum to all.

And all of this, of course, is a way of **being and acting as a single body**. It is a way of living, in our establishments, the comprehensive ecology that will transform our world.

Have I forgotten Madeleine-Sophie? Not really...

## 6. Train Young People in the Spirit of Worship

When she was barely 20 years old and emerging from the French Revolution, M-S had the intuition that guided her whole life and brings us here today.

**What does she do** at this defining moment in her life? She prays alone in front of a tabernacle and in her prayer she lets the world's dire situation come to her, a shattered world without landmarks, where there is no longer a place for God. During the French

Revolution, she witnessed desecrated churches, disemboweled tabernacles and consecrated hosts thrown to the ground, priests guillotined. She takes the measure of the deep ignorance of all that is essential to her. She finds that God is no longer known for what he is, a God who is life and love. She also undoubtedly notes that this ignorance leads to ignorance of man's place in the universe.

**What does this do to her?** It arouses a strong emotion of indignation in her. She herself would like to right the wrongs done to the Blessed Sacrament. To achieve this she imagines that she could create a group of women who would pray 24 hours a day to honor the Blessed Sacrament. Her **emotion** originally made her want to act in immediate response to the dysfunction she finds: no one prays before the Blessed Sacrament any longer, so I will create a group that prays before the Blessed Sacrament. But, she thought to herself, "this would be a lot and yet very little" (to create a congregation of worshiping sisters), so she finds that she must go beyond the immediate response. **She then moves on to a much deeper motion**, one that is much more thoughtful and initiates a much more complex action.

**What does she do with it?** She lets it be the foundation for a very concrete, achievable idea: ***If we had young students whom we trained in the spirit of adoration and reparation, how different that would be... We need to devote ourselves to educating our youth.*** Of course, it was still just a desire, but such a deep, strong desire, that it would come true. And what would be "so different"? The multiplication effect, the training of women trained in the spirit of worship who would themselves influence their husbands and educate their children in this spirit. ***"We would lift up a multitude of women worshipers from every nation, to the very ends of the earth."***

And MS wants the young people whom she wants to educate to take this exact same path. Teach them to think to the point where in their deepest core they will become able to choose freely, based on the criterion of true worship. MS doesn't decide to put them all on a prie-dieu, in prayer. She doesn't even put them in front of the Blessed Sacrament. She trains teachers who, through their own teaching, will lead these young people to learn to think for themselves, to make existential intellectual choices based on a humanity that is open to one's inner life, open to the possibility of faith in God.

MS doesn't say "trained in worship", but rather "trained **in the spirit of worship**". Our humanity is tempted to worship all kinds of gods: the god of money, efficiency, consumerism, the body, sex, speed, technique, power, etc. We live today in a 'fake news' society, of everything immediately, where emotion is king and often avoids deeper thinking.

To train young people or adults in the spirit of worship means teaching them to choose according to what is essential, to choose between what deserves to be worshiped and what doesn't. What deserves to be worshiped, as something sacred that comes from God, is what gives life, a true, creative, energy-giving life of joy, a life that opens up to a future full of promise. "I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance" says Jesus in the Gospel of John (10)



What shouldn't be worshiped, what should be rejected is the very opposite of that which is life, which leads to sadness, confinement, loss of meaning, fear... to something similar to death.

Working on both our own sanctification and our neighbor's is to take that long and demanding path that consists of **moving from emotions to motions**. We are in a society where emotions are king, where taking care is too often understood only in a superficial way. It's not at all about denying emotions. Quite the contrary. It's essential that they be named and given the space to be expressed. But, as Sacred Heart educators, we can't stop there. For ourselves as well as for the youth and adults in our care, it is essential that we do this slow work, which sometimes contradicts the masses and the media, or what we read on social media. Imagine what the world would be like if on all fundamental issues, or questions of ethics or political or economic choices, we made the effort to go beyond our emotions to seek the motions that underlie them. By doing it in all honesty. I believe that the Pope asks these questions in his encyclical: What have we done to our planet, our humanity, we who are the Sacred Heart educators? What does it do to we who have been trained in the spirit of worship? What do we do with it, we who want to be artisans of hope?

## CONCLUSION: Artisans of Hope

To conclude, I would like to use the beautiful title of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission booklet: "Being Craftsmen of Hope in our Blessed and Broken World". This booklet is an agenda for reflection and action.

To be craftsmen of hope! As craftsmen, we agree to tinker with all that the adults and young people of our establishments have to offer us in order that together we can seek the living sources of life. The sources grope for each other... slowly... with perseverance and patience. Like the craftsman when he seeks, by trial and error, how to repair what can be repaired, how to make something new from something old... Often, the craftsman doesn't work alone, he has fellow craftsmen with him and together they seek the gestures, the materials that are best suited to what they want to build. The craftsman learns as he practices... He observes what he has done, pays attention to what it does to him and finally decides what to do with it... and so from time to time, a virtuous path is drawn, a spiral that repeats yet without completely repeating.

Madeleine Sophie wanted to rebuild the foundations of a solid faith within the souls. I have tried to give you some keys to having the invincible courage to undertake this craftsman's work that produces the most beautiful work there is: young people and adults who, in turn, become "craftsmen of hope" for our common home. Young people who think deeply and make life choices that give life, a life of abundance, joy and confidence. Young people who have learned through experience and the support of their teachers that life is not about eliminating the wounds and flaws, the breaks, but is rather about learning from them. New life can spring from the shattering, a life of abundance for all.

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