

FIRST HOUSE
OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME
IN NAMUR

July 7, 1807 – December 6, 1808

**FIRST HOUSE
OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME
IN NAMUR**

July 7, 1807 – December 6, 1808



**First house of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Namur
Rue de l'Eveche**

July 7, 1807 – December 6, 1808

“To the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amiens
Namur, July 8, 1807

My very dear Sisters,

It is only 3:30 a.m. on the day after our arrival in Namur on the 7th of this month. His Lordship received us all with every possible mark of goodness; we went to supper with him.

Our sisters found the house very well, almost too well outfitted...¹
Julie Billiat”

The House

Situated at an angle on the rue du Seminaire and the rue de l'Eveche, the house has a pentagonal shape, with three levels in brick and blue stone, a fine example of the local style of architecture of the 17th century. It's large casement bay windows, the alternating angles of tie-irons, and the harmonious slope of the roof make for a handsome appearance. The lower level, in quarry and limestone, the door and lateral façade are witnesses to the type of outdoor construction of the 16th century.

An attentive eye will discover the large Y anchor beams that gird the building, an inconspicuous coat of arms on the curve of the door, and in the opening of the small obscured window, the commemorative plaque of the arrival of the Sisters of Notre Dame in 1808 (1807 is more exact).²

On the inside, in one part or another in the hallway, the blue stone pieces are seen again. To the right, a lovely spot with a 17th century ceiling and chimney, the upper part of the chimney being in the style of the 18th century. The paneling perhaps encased a painting; and the large bay windows look out on to the cathedral. Immediately following are 2 tiny pieces: On the left, a small corridor leading to the garden, is a hall done in lovely 17th century discreet stucco and a tiny desk. The doors and their hinges are of that century.

The staircase and the forged iron handrail are of the 18th century and lead to the above floors. The first, in spite of the necessary transformations required to adapt the house for it's present functions, has kept the original structure; nothing essential has been changed; the large attic displays a few of the lovely beams in the midst of the renovations that were necessary to make.

The response to an invitation

In June 1806, Father Leblanc, of the Fathers of the Faith proposed to Mere Julie, in Amiens, that she accompany him to Flanders, where he was going to visit one of their colleges. She immediately accepts "in the hopes of doing him so good." Introduced to Msgr. Fallot de Beaumont, the Bishop of Ghent, she agrees to founding some houses in his diocese.³ On December 17, a school is opened at St. Nicholas. From here she writes on January 9 and 10, 1807 to Mere St. Joseph in Amiens:

"You know that I have to go to Namur at the end of January...to see the saintly Bishop..."⁴

This bishop, Msgr. Pisani de la Gaude, since his installation, had been doing his utmost to re-awaken Christianity in his diocese. He had reorganized the seminary, sent for the Brothers of Christian Education, and bought a house for the Ursulines. No doubt having heard of Mere Julie from the Fathers of the Faith and also from Msgr. de Beaumont; he hoped to see her so as to establish a school for girls in his Episcopal city. The *Memoirs* recount with a certain humor the arrival of Mere Julie at the bishop's home one night in January; chilled and frozen she is almost turned away by a displeased servant, before finally being welcomed by the bishop.

"Msgr. showered her with goodness, had her stay in his home, where she remained for three days. It was agreed and arranged that she would return in the summer with sisters. Msgr. immediately rented a house and furnished it with all that was necessary."⁵

This furnished home, situated at No. 163 rue des Recollectines, is attached on one side to the Bishop's Palace and on the other to the seminary. It is rented by Msgr. Pisani on January 24, 1807 from the widow Massart.⁶

This street will be re-named rue de l'Eveche, a term used in this text.

A very cordial correspondence follows between the bishop and the foundress, overflowing with essential subjects: the statutes, the number of sisters, the fixed date for their arrival in Namur, and possible future expenses.

With warmth, Mere Julie expresses her gratitude;⁷ and on May 26, Msgr. Pisani transmits his joy in being able to welcome her.

"I have just received your letter of May 22 and I am answering immediately so that you know of my pleasure and satisfaction on your steadfast decision to come to Namur in the early days of July. It is with great joy that I also learned that your association is approved by our government."⁸

The statutes of the association state that the Sisters of Notre Dame had been approved by an imperial decree on June 16, 1806 with confirmation on March 10, 1807.⁹

The decree of these statutes were to be presented to the department Prefect and to the bishop of the diocese in which this association would be rooted. The Prefect was to inform the Minister of Culture of this request.

Upon Msgr. Pisani's insistence, this legal document was to be transmitted to him without delay, even if Mere Julie had to delay her departure from Amiens for a few days.¹⁰

The decree finally arrived in August.¹¹

Amiens seems to support this new foundation.

April 15, 1807, Mere Julie writes to the Bishop of Namur:

"I can inform you, that the Bishop of Amiens is kind enough to help us with his authority in our dealings with the government." ¹²

The following month, she informs Mgr. Pisani of M. de Sambucy, favorable answers. M. de Sambucy is the confessor of the community and recently named her ecclesiastical superior: ¹³

"Your Excellency, I have the honor of telling you that M. de Sambucy has decided to send 3 of our sisters to Namur. He considers that indispensable because it is in a major city; and also, it is in accordance with our statutes. He has instructed me to tell your Lordship, that the house in Amiens will pay the cost. He prefers to make the sacrifice so that the third sister, who is necessary for our work, will not be a burden to the house in Namur." ¹⁴

A firm and courageous response

Nothing in the letters cited below would lead you to suspect the oppositions that are heaped upon Amiens: against the work of Mere Julie, and against what she called the 'original spirit': a congregation for Christian education supported and animated by a superior general. ¹⁵

She is violently rebuked (March, 1807) for her successive trips to Flanders for the foundations there; the meddling of M de Sambucy and his influence on the Bishop forced Msgr. Demandolx to modify the already his approved list of sisters who were supposed to go to Namur.

"The evening before the departure, M de Sambucy comes to say that the sister who was designated to go to Namur as superior was not to go, but instead, Mere Blin de Bourdon."

Additionally, knowing that the Religious of the Sacred Heart were hoping to buy the Oratory, he did not hesitate to ask for a ready sum of 23.000 francs intended by the foundresses to be used for buying a house in Amiens; the amount of which came in the form of a gift and the sale of land that belonged to Sr. Blin de Bourdon. A receipt had been notarized without a stipulation of interest.

Finally, just before the departure, M de Sambucy insists on having power of attorney over the estate of Françoise Blin de Bourdon.

On June 30, deprived of all resources, Mere Julie and her companion leave Amiens; M de Sambucy leads them about 50 steps from the house and says:

"You, Mere Julie, have done your business here, now go elsewhere to do it."

The travelers pass by Saint-Nicholas and ask Sr. Xavier to accompany them to Namur. They move into the house on rue de l'Eveche on July 7. ¹⁶



July 1807 – end of April 1808

Bishop Pisani puts all of his trust in the new emerging community and gives them as confessor M. Minsart, former Bernadine monk of Boneffe. This devoted priest, of sound judgment, would take to heart the interests of this new congregation, as his letters to the foundresses attest to. The little school run by Sr. Xavier prospers; subsequently, Mere Julie's worries about not receiving any news from Amiens. Fr. Leblanc, passing through Namur on July 23, tells her of the changes which followed the next day with the unexpected departure of the foundresses. He, himself had been relieved of his duties as ecclesial superior and replaced by M. de Sambucy; Sr. Therese Boutrainghan is named superior instead of Mere Julie, and calls herself Mere Victoire (Victoire being her middle name). Awaiting her in Bordeaux is Mgr d'Aviau, who has proposed a plan to unite to the Sisters of Notre Dame, a pious association consecrated to education. The foundress arrives in that city on August 5.¹

The community grows

On the 29th of July, a young lace-maker from Namur, Anne Leroy, arrives as a postulant. She is in very poor health, nevertheless Mere St. Joseph underscores 'her unpolished patience...and with an extraordinary sore throat that is narrowing her gullet.' Regarding Sr. Elisabeth (Sr. Gonzague) coming from Amiens, M. Minsart will go to get her at Mons on September 17. The four young boarding school students are arriving in October to be in their care.

Rosalie Belaire, who is entering in September, will help the children with reading in Sr. Xavier's class; since she has over 80 students. Since she knows their dialect and their catechism, she is a real help to a teacher who's zeal will go so far as to learning a strange catechism by heart, so that she can explain and prepare them for their 'first Communion after Easter' and have them go to their own parishes for catechism.²

Acquiescing to Mere Julie's request, Mere St. Joseph, visits this class twice a week to make sure that the explanations are precise, but, writes Mere St. Joseph to Julie "I am going to go and do a half hour or so of scribbling, which, of course, I do not think they understand."³ As for Sister Louise – who entered in November or December – she is a great cook, "she is proper, intelligent and pious, but there are some small things that need reforming in her."⁴

The winter of 1807-1808 is, without a doubt, hard, if the large bedroom where the sisters sleep is cold, there are 'three very hot humidifiers' in each class. Sr. Anne, who is suffering more and more from tuberculosis, has her bed in the class where lace-making is taught. She dies on February 18, after having pronounced her vows.⁵

Mother St Joseph as superior

Responsible for the formation of these young girls who desired religious life, Mere St. Joseph accompanies them, helps them to strengthen their personalities, worries about their health; and with great insight, she tells Mere Julie about each one:

"Rosalie has a little bit of vanity in her that causes her to be hurtful...I have a lot of hope for her, as does M.Minsart."

"Little Sr. Elizabeth and Sr. Xavier have already had sparks fly between them, but I sense that good will surpasses all that."⁶

Mere Julie reads, “listens,” encourages and shares her faith and her dynamism. From afar, she follows the children and the sisters. Like a simple and spontaneous dialogue, she brings to each one sincere heart felt words.

“Is Sr. Elizabeth doing well with her little female boarders?”

“Sr. Josephine (Xavier) must be very happy; she has so many children to teach.”⁷

With Mother St. Joseph, she approaches the formation of the sister and specifically the taking of a habit.

“I am asking you if she (Rosalie) has foundational principles, for there are certain persons who can only teach children how to read, that is a good thing, but that is not our aim. May you both, before God know what it is you may have to do. The big question is does she really has a vocation.”⁸

Although she has great confidence in her friend, Mere Julie does not tell her of the difficulties in Paris and in Amiens – of the innuendoes – of the anxiety. “How well you know how I need to attach myself to my God, all by myself! Oh yes, I want Him alone to be my strength and my support. I am very sure that your heart hears what I am saying from here, without my having to tell you.”⁹

Daily life

M. Minsart, who was coming nearly every day, though not unnecessarily, sensed that his presence and his help were no longer required. At the end of January 1808, he suggests that if Mere St. Joseph needs him, she has merely to send for him.¹⁰

Mere St. Joseph also knows she is no longer awkward in Msgr. Pisani’s presence.¹¹ In March, during Lent, the bishop gives an evening lecture to the servants in the new chapel. He invites the sisters, and keeps them for an additional half hour. The letter of March 15 recalls these conversations. “He speaks to us very openly from the heart. I believe I see glimpses of grace that, for the glory of God, he is excited to have us. “I would like, he says, that someone begin a foundation, so that I can have twelve or fifteen others like you, and that everyday, in two’s, you would go out to every parish...come back to the motherhouse for dinner and to sleep...but you give me no one...You need a house.” And on April 12, Mere St. Joseph notes: “He says, laughingly, if they don’t want you in Amiens, she (Mere Julie) has only to come here; we will make convents, superiors and mothers general.”¹²

The unforeseen

Calling on Mere St. Joseph the evening of January 19, 1808, to give her an excerpt from a letter from the superior of the Visitation Sisters in Jumet, to send to Mere Julie, Mgr. Pisani had no idea that the arrangements that would follow would lead to a head on collision with the community at the rue de l’Eveche.¹³

The answer does not have to wait. Mgr. Demandolx allows Mere Julie to accept the small establishment in Jumet that the Visitation Sisters are immediately vacating and authorizes her to send him Sisters of Notre Dame. But abruptly, everything changes...Mere Julie is forbidden to leave Amiens.

This sad situation is the other facet that Julie had lived since her return from Bordeaux: the terrible meetings at Poitiers and in Paris, added to her being forbidden to return to Amiens. Finally arriving in the house at Faubourg Noyon, she has to remain there. She is forbidden to travel.

"My dear daughter, she writes on February 2, all must pass through fire to be purified...let us pray...pray a great deal for me." ¹⁴

Two sisters leave for Jumet on March 21. Mere St. Joseph visits them on the 29th and stays several days with them, long enough to learn from Sr. Anastasie and from a letter the calvary that is going on in Amiens. Together, they decide to inform M. Minsart "who is so good and so well disposed toward us." ¹⁵

At the beginning of April, Mgr. Pisani visits a suffering Mere St. Joseph, and she uses this occasion to confide in him about what is happening with Mere Julie. ¹⁶

The same month, in an unexpected way, Mgr. Demandolx proposes to Mere Julie that she go to Jumet; before leaving, however, she hears by chance from Mere St. Joseph's lawyer that M. de Sambucy, because he has had her power of attorney, had sold land that belonged to the foundress. The money has not yet been touched; the business deal must remain secret.

From Jumet, Mere Julie arrives in Namur; the foundresses inform M. Minsart and Msgr. Pisani of the situation in Amiens. The bishop then discovers the name and the social status of Mere St. Joseph. He counsels her to leave for Amiens, to take back her power of attorney and to do this in the best way possible.

Mere Julie and Mere St. Joseph leave the house on the rue de l'Eveche the last days of April, passing through St. Nicolas, and arriving in Amiens on May 5. ¹⁷

From the rue de l'Eveche to the rue des Fosses

We now have to follow, at the same time, the life of this small community, the steps this new house is going to have to make and to notice the power, and the faith of Mere Julie and of Mere St. Joseph, as they face head on the project of the constitutions which do not correspond with the spirit of the Institute.

Once she returned to Amiens, Mere Julie has a letter sent to M. Minsart asking him to look for a larger house, one with a big garden. ¹

In the letters of the following months, the foundress encourages Sr. Xavier to take care of her health and to rejoice that she is "forming the souls of the young for God." She promises her some help.

In July, Sr. Agnes arrives; she has "a good personality and good health...in whom we can trust." This dynamic sister takes to heart the education of little girls, "her treasures." ²

On June 7, Mgr. Pisani, in response to a letter from Mere St. Joseph, asks her to prolong her stay in Amiens, and reminds her of all that invites her "to return to the young women of Namur, who await her return.

"They always conduct themselves marvelously, the number of boarding students is increasing, but the house cannot take any more, for this I am very angry. Come and join us as soon as you can." ³

In view of the unrelenting situation in Amiens, Mere Julie, in her July 6 letter to the Bishop, does not foresee the return of Mere St. Joseph, a fact that profoundly disappoints him as well as M. Minsart. ⁴

A message from the cofoundress to Mgr. Pisani on July 21 holds out one hope. He also writes to Mere Julie somewhat enthused:

"You know Namur. Yes, my diocese is devoted to you, it will always offer a home, for you and for your sisters. You are right, the house is a bit cramped, but God will enlarge it if it is his will that I have a whole beehive."

And to Mere St. Joseph:

"It is true, I did have certain fears about the changes in your arrangements...but I am now fully reassured and I feel very comfortable...I would really only love to have a bigger house...God will get us one, if it is his will to which we must always conform ours." ⁵

M. Minsart sees very clearly the situation in Amiens; for him it makes no sense to attach oneself to a place that wants to impose on the Congregation that which does not correspond to their spirit, nor to the work of God. He also knows the little community in Namur and Sr. Xavier's health that daily is becoming more and more precarious "she is practically always in bed, and she can no longer supervise the sisters nor the children." He sets out to search for a house, he has three possibilities.

The priest's choice finally is a house large enough to receive two hundred poor children and thirty borders, whose payment for board could feed the sisters "who would be necessary for the poor children – the only way to establish a school for poor children in Namur."

On September 26, M. Minsart warns Mere St. Joseph that the Bishop, who had previously manifested his support and consent, no longer agrees. Without a doubt it is because he would find himself responsible for two rents, the one on the rue de l'Eveche and the one of the new house. ⁶

On October 3, M. Minsart offers a solution to the situation: Because he is pastor of the Cathedral, he will occupy the house that the sisters are leaving, thereby relieving the Bishop of one rent. This matter only awaits the arrival of Mere Julie to complete the transaction.

The little community remains a source of preoccupation: Sr. Xavier, who is in constant pain, is obliged to lay down several times a day. Sr. Rosalie does not have a vocation to religious life. The presence of another sister from Amiens is absolutely necessary to support Sr. Elizabeth and Sr. Agnes for fear, that they too, will become ill. ⁷

In Amiens, while all the while not admitting to the principle of a superior general, Mgr. Demandolx authorizes **Mere Julie** to go to Namur. She leaves October 15 with Sr. Eulalie de Laporte and Sr. Firmine, who will go to Jumet. ⁸

On October 23, she sends a long letter to Mere St. Joseph.

"I must say to you, to you alone, that the whole little convent of our sisters had fallen out with the good bishop because of the house in question. All had been agreed upon; all has been changed. Good M. Minsart has been on the field of battle with his Lordship about moving from the house which his Lordship had rented for us. His Lordship was very displeased with Sr. Xavier and Sr. Elizabeth, I did not know how it was all going to turn out..."

Mere Julie goes on to recount the evening with the Bishop:

"When I presented myself I was shaking, but the good God allowed his Lordship to have the kindness of receiving me very well. However, he rattled out the whole string of complaints from beginning to end, about the house in question...At last he told me to go and see the house, I made all kinds of objections. Seeing how much that annoyed him, I obeyed him..."

Mere Julie found the house just as M. Minsart had described it, spacious enough to welcome classes for poor children and thirty or so boarders. Because of the means of M. Minsart, 300 florins is found and guaranteed for two years without costing the sisters anything. It appears that the matter is to be settled on the 24th.⁹

From Ghent, a long letter is sent to Mere St. Joseph in Amiens. Mere Julie comes back to the story of the house in Namur. One must read this excerpt:

“I want to tell you – very quietly – that I had four or five interviews with the bishop of Namur about this. I can assure you that it took everything I had not to run away, the good God gave me the patience. Sessions of more than two hours: wanting to; not wanting to any longer, giving me all kinds of reasons which were just, no doubt, but not wanting to give his consent nor wanting to stop the negotiations.

...At last, however, he said to take the lease secretly for three, six or nine years. I shall let you see the copy. I was not asked for any money and I did not offer any.”¹⁰

The little community of Namur is always in the heart of the prayer and attention of Julie. When she passed through Namur in October, she had dismissed Sr. Rosalie who did not have a vocation and brought Louise to Jumet, as she was passing through. Thus she invites Sr. Eulalie to focus all her attention and her care on the small group of sisters and on the children. She guides this young sister with affection and a certain firmness, and asks her to keep her apprised of what life is like in Namur.¹¹

The sisters leave the house on the rue de l’Eveche on **December 6, 1808** and live at the Hotel des Quarre at the rue des Fosses. According to the Memoir (found in Archives at the Namur Cathedral) written by his own hand, Msgr. Pisani states, “they brought the furniture with them, with the agreement of the bishop who owned the furniture, and signed a double copy, one of which was kept by the bishop.” M. Minsart agrees to pay the rent. The same text indicates how the bishop worked out the financial agreement with him.¹²

Mere Julie continues to deal with the difficulties arising from the choice of a house. In all simplicity she writes to the Bishop of Namur on December 8:

“Monsignor, I am confident you will have forgotten in your goodness the little disappointments our sisters may have caused you by not appreciating all of your kindness. You have overwhelmed us with it since you granted us the favor of receiving us into your good town of Namur. I do not know how to express my gratitude for this. I ask your pardon many, many times for all the trouble we may have caused your Lordship. I am confident you will always be kind enough to grant us your protection for the continuation of the good work your zeal and charity began for the greater glory of the good God.

She follows by underscoring the situation in Amiens:

“At the moment when we expected it the least, a decision was made about our Constitutions by his lordship the bishop of Amiens. It is not in the least what we desire in order to follow our primitive spirit...

We are both embarrassed, Mere St. Joseph and I, to know how to get out of this situation, though we are neither of us pledged to anything concerning his Lordship of Amiens.

We want the good of our establishment, but according to our views the constitutions are not suitable to foster the good of the other houses. There is no question at all of a superior general.”¹³

Reading the Memories of Mere St. Joseph we discover that this painful time was lived by the foundresses in faith and in prayer, but also with a prudence and firmness, whether it was about the constitutions or about the temporal affairs of Mere Blin.¹⁴

January 12, 1809 the grand-vicar, M. Cottu, informs Mere Julie, in the name of the Bishop of Amiens, “she can go to any diocese that she wants to; as far as he is concerned, he is taking back the house and will form real sisters of Notre Dame.”

On the 14th Mere Julie invites Mere St. Joseph to write to Msgr. Pisani, letting him know of her arrival with some sisters.

They leave Amiens on the 15th.

January 21, the group of travelers arrive in Namur in the evening. The sisters at the rue des Fosses welcomes them with great joy.¹⁵

Regarding Mere St. Joseph, she has to take on the heavy burden and responsibility of organizing the trip for the sisters who want to rejoin Mere Julie, to send what is worth sending and to sell the rest. “Julie had told her ‘in case sisters decide to stay, they will not be ours.’ I see their inflexibility regarding me...you are not to do anyone any favors.”¹⁶

Mere Julie writes to her on January 23:

“Ah! My good and loving friend, how good the good God is! We arrived in Namur on Saturday evening. All the sisters are extremely pleased and thank the good God. The bishop has read to me all the letters that had been written to him... I showed him the letter the Bishop of Amiens had sent me. M. Minsart is absolutely delighted at seeing in all this the holy will of the good God. He is doing his utmost to get us all that is necessary.”

After having conjured up the Bishop of Amiens, she adds:

“The good God will make you strong with his strength... Yes, my dear friend, I have the greatest confidence that God will be your strength and your support.”

The foundress says nothing about the icy welcome she had received at her first interview with Msgr. Pisani, who scolded her for having moved the sisters in the heart of winter. It is true that a record of grievances had preceeded her to Namur. After a long session of explanations, the bishop, “touched by her patience, her courage and her charity, shows her his support by inviting her to dine with him.”¹⁷

AVIS.

BELLE

MAISON

A VENDRE.

LE public est informé que le mardi, 18 avril 1809, aux dix heures matin, d'après le jugement du tribunal de première instance séant à Namur, en date du 28 mars même année, dûment enregistré, la dame JEANNE-FRANÇOISE SABLON, veuve du sieur JEAN-PHILIPPE MASSART, propriétaire demeurant à Wavre, et le sieur *Ferdinand Pierson*, notaire audit Wavre, en sa qualité de subrogé tuteur, de JEANNE-FRANÇOISE-PHILIPPINE MASSART, feront vendre publiquement aux enchères, à la suite des affiches apposées de la manière voulue par la loi, par-devant le notaire *Buydens*, chargé, par ledit tribunal, de recevoir les enchères, et en présence dudit subrogé tuteur, une maison sise rue des Recollectines à Namur, cotée du N.º 165, joignant d'un côté à l'évêché et de l'autre au Séminaire.

L'adjudication préparatoire, aura lieu ledit jour, 18 avril 1809, en l'étude dudit notaire *Buydens*, demeurant rue Basse-Marcelle, N.º 264 à Namur, et l'adjudication définitive, le mardi, 25 même mois.

Vu et certifié par nous, Maire de Namur.

Le 4 — 1809.

Il est déclaré par le Maire de Namur, que le présent avis a été affiché, en vertu de la loi, le 4 avril 1809, aux droits légaux par lui, le 4 avril 1809.

History to follow

And if we speak about the houses?

The sisters occupied the Massart house situated at an angle at the rue de l'Eveche and the rue du Seminaire.

Msgr. Pisani had rented it on January 24, 1807 and **bought it** on April 25, 1809. The analytical catalogue given to us by M. Goffin in 2003 allowed us to discover in the Archives of the Province of Namur in Namur, a poster announcing the public sale of "a house situated on the rue des Recollectines, side No. 163, joined on one side by the Bishop's palace and on the other by the seminary."¹

(Formerly, the property of the Recollectines – or Grey Nuns-was actually in the place where the current Bishop's garden is situated).²

This address never appears with the name of Mere Julie who is happy to write: "To Mademoiselle St. Joseph, teacher near the Episcopal Palace. Department of Sambre and Meuse in Namur" (Letter of Aug. 10, 1807and following)

On November 3, 1823, the **government** buys the building to enlarge the seminary.³

When this seminary is in Salzinnes from 1967 to January 2000, the group of buildings take the name of a diocesan house.

The house, once occupied by the Sisters of Notre Dame, becomes in 1992 the **Diocesan School Office**, which since 1987 had had several locations.

On September 5, 1978, the house was classified by royal decree for its historical and artistic value. It was lime-washed in yellow in 2002 and is perfectly integrated in the ensemble of bishop's house and seminary.⁴

Actual Address: 5 rue de l'Eveche.

Regarding the house on **rue des Fosses**, the Memoires recount with relish the circumstances of it's acquisition. Mere Julie, coming from Breda, stops in Brussels and has to wait a long time for a stage coach. Her intuition leads her to visit Countess Ribeaucourt who suggests that she buy Hotel de Quarre, which happens to be an inheritance of hers from the Counts of Quarre.

All Mere Julie has to do is get to Namuur, speak to Mere St. Joseph and Msgr. Pisani, who advise her to buy and she returns in haste to Brussels. The house is paid for in cash.⁵

On December 13, 1809, the analytical catalogue of patrimonial real estate indicates the name of the new owner: Blin.⁶

In the Archives of the Chancery, on December 15, 1809, in Msgr. Pisani's own hand is written:

"This day, Demoiselle Blin has just bought the house of M. de Quarre: This is where she will lodge her girls and the bishop has heard nothing of this nor of the purchase, nor of the sale price."⁷

And if we met Mere Julie and Mere St. Joseph and also Msgr. Pisani?

The correspondence of January-February, 1809 between the foundresses unveils the distressing situation of Mere St. Joseph in Amiens and the support that Mere Julie does her utmost to give her.

Msgr. confirms the direction of the congregation.

On January 25

"The Bishop of Namur wants no establishment without a superior general, not because that is me, but because the good of the Institute demands it, he will hold firm to that."

On the 28th of the same month, she suggests that the relationship is very cordial:

"Msgr. has seen our sisters every day of the week, sometimes 2 and 3 times, I saw him yesterday and he seemed very satisfied of their honesty and simplicity." 'I desire that you do well regarding my children.' he added.

And this the following day:

"...he says you are free to dispose of your fortune."⁸

Each time, Mere Julie underscores the insistence of the bishop that Mere St. Joseph return as soon as possible.

"You are very much wanted in Namur by Msgr....He will give us our very great treasure, a chapel, as soon as you are here." (February 1)

When I told him about the troubling situation you were in, he said, 'Assure her of my devotion.' That is some relief, my good friend; the good God treats us better than he did his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ!" (February 6)

And in one of her last letters:

"My dear good daughter, if it pleases the good God I hope that this is the last time I shall be writing to you in Amiens. I have received an explicit order to tell you to leave immediately after receipt of this letter..."

His Lordship wants the house in Namur to be the **motherhouse**; I tell you this in a whisper. He is very pleased to have the Amiens community and we are looked upon kindly in this city...

Kind regards to everyone who speaks of poor Julie, **Sister of Notre Dame de Namur** and not of Amiens." (February 24)⁹

The bishop had promised that as soon as Mere St. Joseph arrived, he would allow the use of the Chapel; this was deferred until April 21, even though the cofoundress was in Namur since March 5. Msgr. Pisani came himself to celebrate the first Mass and on that occasion preached a lesson, the draft of which is kept in the Seminary Archives.

*"Watch over one another and on the instruction of others. Congratulate yourselves, my dear sisters, we can attribute to you the same advice that Paul gave his beloved disciple...Is it not, my dear sisters, that which you desired when you entered into this religious association that has reunited you under the direction of one whom you have chosen for Mere, and who looks on you like her children?"*¹⁰

At the opening of the retreat on September 20, 1809, Msgr. announces what he calls a "familial instruction." His text is inspired by St. Bernard:

"O solitude, you alone prepare rest for my soul.
Solitude of the body, you attract a visit from God.
Solitude of the spirit, you hear his Word.
Solitude of the heart, you are the center of all.
O Blessed Solitude."

The following day, the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is installed in the Chapel. Mere St. Joseph will speak of the 'residence' of the Blessed Sacrament.

On November 13, the bishop develops the great themes of death – life – Baptism – Confession and the mercy of God.

Each of his drafts are conserved in the Archives of the Seminary and have as title: "Familial instruction to the Sisters of Christian Schools". Why does he call us that? We ignore the reference, for there is no doubt whatsoever. Msgr. Pisani is addressing himself to the Sisters of Notre Dame.¹¹

A letter from the Bishop dated January 1, 1810 is one of the most encouraging:
"To my dear daughters, the Sisters of Notre Dame reunited in Namur.

I therefore ask God, this God of goodness and mercy, that he keeps in the interior of your souls a constant peace, and among yourselves a most intimate and long lasting relationship; may he sustain your courage in the excellent work of educating young people..." "One must hope that God will give you the grace of fidelity in your vocation – and thus, bringing about your salvation, you will have gloriously cooperated in the salvation of the souls of your young students, obtained for my diocese, for the Church, abundant spiritual fruit, and to your bishop, an intimate and long lasting consolation which will help to relieve the continuous anxieties of his pastoral concerns. In the love and in the spirit of Our Savior Jesus Christ, my dear daughters, I am your Bishop and Father

(s) C.F.J. ev. De Namur"¹²

And the records continue rue des Fosses...rue Julie Billiart
and also rue de l'Eveche

1906, year of the beatification of Mere Julie

February 14, Msgr. Heylen, Bishop of Namur, shares an idea for a project: to turn an Oratory into a public chapel in the house occupied by the Sisters of Notre Dame from 1807 to December 6, 1808

In the small walled up door, on rue de l'Eveche, will be re-opened, and there will be a statue of Mere Julie in white marble, ordered from Rome by Mere Aloysie, superior general. This project came to nothing.¹³

In 1969, year of the canonization of Mere Julie

A commemorative plaque was affixed in the obscured window, next to the front door at 5 rue de l'Eveche.

Each year the Sisters of Notre Dame and friends come from all over the world gather in the house where Mere Julie began her work of education in Namur.

Soeur Marie-Francine Vanderperre
June 2005



NOTES

(All references are for texts written in French. For those wishing to read further, refer to the number of the letter cited and not to the page indicated.)

The house

1. *Lettres de Sainte Julie Bi/liart, fondatrice des Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Namur*. Presses de l'Université grégorienne. Rome. 1976 - n° 55, p.145 [abréviation: L.J.]
2. *Le patrimoine monumental de la Belgique* - volume 52, province de Namur, arrondissement de Namur Ministère de la Culture française, Soled, Liège 1975 - fig.321, p.536; fig.374 p.631
3. CLAIR CH. *La Bienheureuse Mere Julie Bi/liart, fondatrice et premiere superieure generale de l'Institut des Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Namur*. A.Savaète. Paris 1906, 4e éd.p.87 à 92 [abréviation: CLAIR]
4. L.J. op.cit. N° 47, p.129
5. - CLAIR op.cit. p.94
- *Vie de Julie Bi/liart par sa premiere compagne Françoise Blin de Bourdon ou les Memoires de l'vler Saint Joseph* - Tipografia P.U.R. Roma 1978 - p.46, 47 [abréviation: Mémoires]
6. GoFFIN ANDRÉ M. *Documents relatifs au patrimoine immobilier de Namur intra muros 1794-1859*. Ed.Bruxelles 2003 - n° 163. Location PN 4861, acte 659; p.32 [abréviation: Documents]
7. L.J. op.cit. n° 52, p.141; n° 53, p.142-143; n°54, p.144
8. Mémoires op.cit.p.392
9. CLAIR op.cit. p.86
10. Mémoires op.cit. p.392
11. *Lettres en dialogue entre Julie Bi/liart et Françoise Blin de Bourdon. JO aoÛt 1807 - 26 fevrier 1809*. Communication Center U.S.A. 1996 - n° 1 p.6 [abréviation: L.D.]
12. L.J. op.cit.n°53, p.143
13. CLAIR op. cil. p.98. 100: Mémoires op.cit.p.50
14. L.J. op. cil. n°54, p.144
15. CLAIR op.cit. p.98-99
16. Mémoires op.cil.pA7; 68-1e; 49-50; CLAIR op.cit.p.100-103

From July 1807 – end of April 1808

1. CLAIR Op.cil.p.104 à 106; L.J. op.cit. n°56, p.147 à 149
2. L.D. op. cil. n°2 p.16; n° 3 p.24-25; n° 11, p.61-62; Mémoires op.cit.p.67
3. L.J. op.cit.n°64, p.184; L.D. op.cit. pAl: L.D. op.cil n° 11 p.62
4. L.D. op.cit. n° 6 p.37
5. Id. N° 7 p.45; CLAIR op.cil p.122
6. L.D. op. cil. n° 6 p.38; n° 4 p.24
7. L.J. op.cit. n° 60 p.176; L.D. op. cil. p.30
8. Id. n° 64 p.185; L.D. op.cit. pAl
9. Id. n° 62 p.178; L.D. op.cit. p.33
10. L.D. op. cil. n° 7 pA5
11. L.J. n° 58, p.157; L.D. op.cit. n° 1, p.6
12. L.D. op.cit.no13 p.71; n° 15 p.82
13. Mémoires p.68, 69; L.D. op. cil. n° 7 p.44
14. L.J. op. cil. n° 65 p.187; L.D. op.cit. p.46; L.J. op.cit.no 67 p.191; L.D. op.cit. p.51, 52
15. L.J. op. cil. n° 73, p.210; L.D. op.cit. p.79; Mémoires op. cil. p.71; L.D. op.cit. n° 14, p.80
16. L.D. op. cil. n° 15. p.88
17. Mémoires op. cil. p.73 à 76; CLAIR op.cit. p.127 à 129.

From the rue de l'éveche to the rue des Fosses

1. Mémoires op. cil. p.83
2. L.J. op. cil. n° 75, p.218; n° 79, p.224; n° 81, p.227
3. Mémoires op. cil. p. 393
4. L.J. op.cit. n° 78 p.222, 223
5. Mémoires op. cil. p.394, 395
6. Id. p.396 à 399
7. Id. p.399-400
8. Id. p.97 à 99

9. L.J. op.cil. n° 82, p.227 à 229
10. Id. n° 83, p.233; CLAIR op.cil. p.142-145
11. L.J. op. cil. n° 84, 85 p.235 à 237; n° 88 p.243 à 247
12. CLAIR op. cil. p.144 note 1; p.153-154
MGR PISANI *Memoire historique sur la translation des Soeurs des Ecoles chretiennes de la maison Massart il la maison Quarre* 5 décembre 1809 – Archives de l'Evêché de Namur. Carton 4, 1ère page. [Abréviation: Mémoire historique]
13. L.I. op.cit. n° 89,p.248-249
14. Mémoires op.cil. p.93 à 119
15. Id. p.109-110; CLAIR op.cil. p.155 à 164
16. Mémoires op.cil. p.115
17. L.J. op. cil. n° 94, p.257 à 260; CLAIR op. cil. p.165

History to follow

1. Documents op.cil. n° 163, P.N. 5357, acte 1732; affiches (joint évêché et séminaire) p.32
2. Patrimoine op. cil. p.537; fig.321 p. 536
3. Documents op.cil. n° 163, P.N. 5383; acte 8374; pour agrandir le séminaire
4. *Namur - monuments et sites classes*. Edition du Perron p.139
5. Mémoires op.cil. p.177 à 179
6. Documents op. cil. n° 966 PN. 4920-1, acte 2462 p.147
7. Mémoire historique op.cil. le page
8. L.J. op. cil. n° 97, p.264; L.D. op.cil. p.107-; n° 99 p.268; L.D. op.cil. p.114 - n° 100 p.270, L.D. op.cil. p.116
9. Id. n° 101 p.273; L.D. op.cil.p.123 - n° 104, p.289; L.D. p.148 - n° 111 p.309 et 311; L.D. p.182 et 184
10. Mémoires op. cil. p.147; MGR PiSANI, *Brouillon pour une instruction familiere aux Soeurs des ecoles chretiennes*. Archives du Séminaire. Namurcum 462,21 avril 1809 [Abréviation: Instruction]
11. Mémoires op. cil. p.147; Instruction op.cil. 20 septembre 1809; 19 novembre 1809
12. Mémoires op.cil.p.395
13. Archives de la Maison mère C14 p.95

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives

Archives de l'évêché de Namur

Archives de l'Etat et de la Province de Namur – Namur

Archives de la Maison mère des Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Namur - Namur

Archives du séminaire de Namur

Ouvrages

AIGRET N.-J.. *Histoire de l'Eglise et du Chapitre de Saint-Aubain*
veuve F.-J.Doux fils, Namur 1881

BILLIART Julie *Lettres de*
Presses Université Grégorienne Rome 1976

BILLIART Julie et BLIN de BOURDON Françoise
Lettres en dialogue entre
Equipe Notre Dame International Communications Center USA

BLIN de BOURDON Françoise
Vie de Julie Billiart par sa première compagne
ou les Mémoires de Mère Saint-Joseph
Tipografia P.U.G. Roma 1979

CLAIR Charles de la Compagnie de Jésus
La Bienheureuse Mère Julie Billiart fondatrice et première supérieure
générale des Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Namur.
4e éd. Arthur Savaète Paris 1906

GOFFIN André-M. *Documents relatifs au patrimoine immobilier de Namur "intra muros"*
(1794-1859)
Bruxelles 2003

MINISTÈRE de la CULTURE française
Le patrimoine monumental de la Belgique
Vol.5, tome 2 Soledis Liège 1975

(Note: Only numbers 2, 3, and 4 of the above references are available in English)

IIIUSTRATIONS

Angled façade on rue de l'Evêché and rue du Séminaire

Front door on rue de l'Evêché commemorative plaque of the arrival of the Sisters of Notre-Dame (Error: arrival should read 1807 and not 1808)

Poster: announcing the sale of the house Massart (bought by Msgr. Pisani April 25, 1809) Archives de l'Etat et de la Province de Namur, PN 5367

Angled house on rues de l'Evêché et du Séminaire, engraving by Bodart, first third of the 20th century. Bodart, Maurice dit Henri (1874-1949) - painter - engraver – designer from Namur