

"Ignatian-Salesian Spirituality and the Sisters of St. Joseph"

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Introduction

Many of you are already familiar with the "Consensus Statement" formulated by the CSJ Federation Research Team in the 1970s, which has been adopted and incorporated in various ways by all American congregations of Sisters of St. Joseph (handout). This is intended to be a summary of the attitudes and aspirations of contemporary Sisters of St. Joseph – in a word, their "spirit." We sisters who have embraced this statement are confident that it resonates with the spirit which animated the original generation of CSJs, because we believe that there is a certain continuity of interior experience which has not been destroyed by the 350 years of intervening history. In the 19th century, John Henry Newman articulated for our church a way of understanding this continuity in his proposal about "the development of doctrine." We can apply his concept to our present topic and speak about "the development of a spiritual tradition." This means that the primary aspects of the spirituality are not lost, but they do undergo adaptations under the influence of personality, culture and history. Forms of religious life have developed; in the course of those three centuries, our sisters have experienced different styles of prayer and different ways of implementing the common life. And forms of service, especially the service of education, have also developed. But because we believe that there is an "interior continuity" throughout the history of the community, we do well to turn first to the original chapter in CSJ history if we want to understand the animating spirit of Sisters of St. Joseph in this year 2000. And after discovering what we can there, investigating successive chapters of that history (as Carol Coburn and Sr. Martha Smith have done in their book Spirited Lives) can help us to see the development of the sisters' spirituality.

At this point, we want to read that "first chapter" carefully. The actors in that first chapter are Jean-Pierre Medaille, a Jesuit serving in southern France in the middle of the seventeenth century; and a group of dedicated Catholic women who wanted to do the works of charity and benefited from Medaille's advice about how to develop their spiritual life in a way that would support those good works. We have Fr. Medaille's advice and directives in the small collection of CSJ "primitive documents," and from those documents we can cull the major themes of the early community's spirituality. But we need to look back even further, to the two persons who seem to have most deeply marked Medaille's spirituality – Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales. In this session I will highlight the aspects of their teaching and practice which seem to have deeply influenced Medaille and the first Sisters of St. Joseph.

At the end of the Consensus Statement, you see the line "in an Ignatian-Salesian climate: that is, with an orientation toward excellence tempered by gentleness, peace, and joy." That could give the impression that the only "Ignatian" aspect of the spirituality is an orientation toward excellence. This orientation toward "the more" is admittedly a primary characteristic of Ignatius of Loyola's life and his tradition, which explains why Sr. Kathleen McCluskey focused on this aspect in her address two years ago to the national ACSSJ conference ("Excellence Tempered by Gentleness," June 1998). Because I don't want to repeat what has already been said by Sr. McCluskey, I will not highlight that aspect per se, but will take it for granted as part

of the picture. Surely there were other ways in which the Ignatian tradition influenced the founding sisters, and I will point out evidence for those strains of influence in the primitive documents of the sisters but also in the contemporary Consensus Statement. The same could be said about the "Salesian" influence, which is accurately represented by the final phrase of the Consensus Statement but also exceeds those three virtues. Also, because both Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales were living during the era of the Catholic Reformation, they were caught up in that larger movement, and for that reason their teachings resonate with each other in some significant ways

First, let me briefly introduce the persons named on the chart which sets the context for our topic (handout):

- *Ignatius of Loyola* (1491-1556) came from a family of minor nobility in northern Spain. As a teenager he was attached to the treasurer of King Ferdinand and Isabella to be trained for court life. The chivalrous young Ignatius joined the Spanish troops which had been besieged by the French army at Pamplona. He was seriously wounded in that battle, and retired to his family estate at Loyola. During several months there, he underwent his famous conversion, prompted by his reading and re-reading the only books available to him at Loyola – one on the life of Christ and the other a collection of the lives of the saints. That was followed by several more months of reflection at Manresa, during which time his relationship with God deepened and the main themes of his spirituality developed. At the end of this period of personal conversion, Ignatius felt called to share with others the fruits of his experiential learning; he was "animated with a great desire to serve in any way that God might ask of him" (Autobiography par. 14). But he thought that his desire needed to be stabilized with formal education, so between 1524 and 1535 he studied at Alcalá, Salamanca and finally Paris. During those years of study, he guided several friends and companions through what he called the "Spiritual Exercises." This was a plan for retreat, based on his own experience of conversion and dedication to God, which he had first drafted at Manresa and revised several times over at least a decade. The Exercises were designed to bring the retreatant to a commitment to do "whatever will serve the greater glory of God." By the end of his years of study, Ignatius and six companions dedicated themselves to Christ and his service, and within a few years they were formally organized as the Society of Jesus, and they put themselves at the disposal of the pope to do "whatever would serve God and the church better." (Note here the "more" and "better"; that is the "*magis*" which Sr. McCluskey focused on in her earlier address.)

[The major works of Ignatius are the Spiritual Exercises, the original Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, his Autobiography, and several letters.]

- *Francis de Sales* (1567-1622) was born to a well-situated family in the Savoy district of France. They were devout Catholics, though many around them were Calvinists. Francis had the advantage of a fine education, and he spent his young adult years under the tutelage of Jesuits. He studied humanities and philosophy at the Jesuit College of Clermont in Paris, and later while studying law and theology at Padua he selected a Jesuit as his spiritual director. During those formative years, he not only became an educated gentleman, but also developed a strong desire for holiness. While a student he suffered a faith crisis occasioned by the teaching on predestination, and it was only resolved when

Francis decided to focus entirely on God's love and mercy. This confidence in divine love and the desire to imitate it dominated the rest of his life. For example, he wrote to his friend Jane de Chantal: "I come to the end of this year with a great and even burning desire to make progress now in [God's] holy love which I have always loved. May God live in my heart, for that's what it was made for" (cited in Bowden, 70). The learned bishop of Geneva (a position he received at the age of 35) became well known for his gentleness, kindness and humility, which became part of the attraction of his teaching.

[Francis' major works were Treatise on the Love of God, Introduction to the Devout Life, and many letters of spiritual advice to Jane de Chantal and other devout persons.]

- The *Catholic Reformation* has a slightly larger meaning than the older term "Counter-Reformation." The prefix "counter" indicates that the Catholic church in the Council of Trent and thereafter was working against Protestants and all their reforming ideas. The term "Catholic Reformation," on the other hand, includes the reform movements which were at work in the church before Martin Luther and also implies that the Catholic church also undertook to reform itself during the religious upheaval of the sixteenth century.

Both Ignatius Loyola and Francis de Sales were recipients of, and donors to, the sixteenth-century renewal of Catholicism. They were both educated in Christian humanism and therefore respected the dignity of humanity infused by grace; and both shared the church's concern that faith would be founded on a true understanding of God and expressed in a life of virtue. Each emphasized, though in different ways, the love of God; and each provided practical exercises for developing the spiritual life.

- *Jean-Pierre Medaille* (1610-1669) was a French Jesuit about whose personal history we know only the framework: He was assigned to various Jesuit colleges and to the missionary band in the Toulouse province. He was clearly in relationship – a relationship of advice and spiritual direction – to many of the first generation Sisters of St. Joseph, and he authored their primitive documents. Tradition has attributed the foundation of the community in Le Puy in 1650 to Fr. Medaille. By the year of his death, there were at least thirty-four local groups (communities) of sisters of St. Joseph in five dioceses; Fr. Medaille was undoubtedly the founder of six of these communities, and was probably involved with many others (Byrne, 36 ff.).

The spirituality of Fr. Medaille and his associates, the Sisters of St. Joseph, was "Ignatian-Salesian" because through his Jesuit formation he learned the Ignatian tradition, and from his French Catholic culture he absorbed devotion to the great Francis, bishop of Geneva, who died in 1622 and was declared a saint in 1665.

Characteristics of the Sisters' Spirituality

I would like to suggest to you three major characteristics of the spirituality which characterized the early Sisters of St. Joseph. In the process, I touch on the two important characteristics described by Sr. McCluskey – "excellence" and "gentleness" – but will fit them into another scheme.

An Incarnational Spirituality

First of all, their spirituality was profoundly incarnational, in both its "capital I" sense – that is, the Incarnation as a Christian doctrine naming the mystery that God became a human in Jesus; and in its "small i" sense – that is, pointing to materiality and human history.

Many reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, recognized that much formal theology had become overly speculative and also that many Christians knew little or nothing about Jesus of the New Testament. Thus one of the themes in the renewal movements of the 16th century was "back to Jesus, back to the Scripture." Ignatius' conversion experience turned him toward Jesus, and he profoundly understood Jesus as "sent by God" and "bearing God on earth." For him, the Incarnation was the Divine Trinity's greatest gift. He believed that one could see God's loving design for all creation, and learn how to respond to God, by contemplating Jesus. Thus in the Spiritual Exercises, the majority of attention is given to meditations on the life of Jesus. These meditations are not speculative, but rather imaginative and affective. Ignatius directs the retreatant to "apply the imagination," in order to enter into the biblical scene, and hopefully such imaginative participation will provoke a felt response.

This prayerful imagining of persons, places and events indicates a positive assessment of created reality. It is one of the marks of Ignatius' "world-affirming spirituality." Ignatius hoped that the retreatant, by the end of the Exercises, would be ready to "see God in all things." The converted person would recognize and embrace everyone and everything as a sacrament of God's presence and a messenger of God's word. The world in its finitude, in its materiality, is a sacrament of God. One commentator describes it this way:

"As a result of the experiences of Manresa, Ignatius begins to take a radically different view of the world and what being in the world means for one who seeks God above all things. He tells us how he gave up the extremes of his precious asceticism. For Ignatius, one does not turn away from the world in order to seek God. In a certain sense, one can even say the opposite. One turns *toward* the world because that is precisely where God is to be found" (Sachs 75-6).

This is what has been called Ignatius' "mysticism of joy in the world."

But for Ignatius, this prayerful process of "seeing God in all things," contemplating the effects of the Incarnation in the world, was not complete in itself. It included another dynamic – the discernment of a *summons*. The person who received the gift of *seeing* God's love and goodness had to *do* the good in love. The theology of grace which would be formally published as the Catholic position by the Council of Trent was already at work in Ignatius' meditation and teaching: Faithful Christians cooperate with divine grace in the building of the Kingdom of God through the works of charity. Faith needs to be incarnated, made historical, and that process of incarnation is a process of cooperation with God.

Underneath this call to do good works is an optimistic view of human nature. Ignatius and Francis de Sales, both steeped in Christian humanism, shared a positive assessment of humanity as created by God and therefore capable of knowing and loving God and doing good. Salesian optimism, however, paradoxically rested in part on a keen awareness of the weakness of

human nature. Because Francis knew God as merciful and compassionate, he was very tolerant of the human condition. Francis counseled his friends to peacefully, even joyfully, accept themselves because their compassionate God loved them in all their imperfection.

In the primitive documents of the Sisters of St. Joseph, we hear Fr. Medaille turning their attention toward Jesus, the Incarnation of God. Medaille reminds the sisters that "Jesus Christ lives in them and they in Jesus Christ" (Constitutions II,2) and he exhorts them: "Tend solely and lovingly to resemble the dear Savior perfectly and in all things. Let him live in you and you live utterly in him" (Maxim 41). He presents for their meditation both Jesus' humility and his zeal.

Ignatius' appreciation of the sacramentality of reality seems to have become for CSJs a belief that God was speaking to them in society's needs, both physical and spiritual. They were ready to "undertake all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of which women are capable" (Reglements, "Goal"), in response to the invitation of Christ in the poor: "Whatever you do for the dear neighbor, do it with the same feeling of devotion and of charity as if you were doing it for the very person of Jesus Christ" (Maxim 49).

The very fact that CSJs undertook such a variety of works implies a certain confidence in their own abilities. The primitive documents, however, exhort them not to lose sight of their own weakness and failings. On this point, their approach appears closer to that of Francis de Sales: "It will be easy for them, helped by God's grace, to practice all that has been suggested above if they have a total distrust of themselves and their weakness along with perfect confidence in the power of divine omnipotence and goodness which can, in a moment, make great saints of the most imperfect people" (Constitutions II,3).

A Spirituality of Discernment

Between the experience of faith-filled contemplation and the experience of faith-motivated action, there is an intervening moment – the experience of discernment. This is how one comes to understand *which* action to undertake.

The spirituality of discernment already had a long history before Ignatius of Loyola, but his description and method influenced not only his own Jesuit followers but also many others. Ignatius elaborated several "rules for the discernment of spirits" in the Spiritual Exercises, and he recorded a reflective analysis of the group discernment undertaken in the foundation of the Jesuit community.

According to Ignatius' description, there are two dispositions and one skill which must precede and accompany any process of discernment. The dispositions are first, *confidence* in God's love poured out in creation and expressed in the offer of salvation to all; and secondly, the intention to *free oneself* of anything which could hinder one's full response to whatever summons will come. The skill is *awareness* or the ability to pay attention.

→ Confidence: This is a secure belief in God's loving intention toward not just oneself but toward everyone, and beyond that toward the whole of creation. Because this benevolent intention is divine, it cannot be thwarted by human shortcomings or failures.

This disposition helps to free one from inordinate worry about not making exactly the right decision, because God's all-encompassing good will can include even that.

→ Freedom: This is an important attitude for the discerning person. Ignatius says that one can use anything in creation which will lead to the greater praise and glory of God, but should turn away from anything which does not encourage that goal. His proposed meditations on "Three Classes of Persons" and "Three Kinds of Humility" reveal his keen understanding of the ways in which human beings can be attached to subtle self-seeking, which also limits freedom to hear God's word. At times Ignatius, like Francis de Sales, uses the language of "indifference" when he is talking about freedom, an indifference exemplified in this description of "the second degree of humility": "When the options seem equally effective for the service of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul, I do not desire or feel myself strongly attached to have wealth rather than poverty, or honor rather than dishonor, or a long life rather than a short one." In other words, no particular thing is more important than attachment to God's loving intention for the world. This disposition was also promoted by Francis de Sales, who counseled Jane de Chantal toward spiritual liberty so that she would be ready to perceive and respond to God's call.

→ Awareness: Discernment begins with self-awareness, and especially of one's own motives. It makes sense, then, that the foundational virtue required for discernment is humility – seeing and accepting the truth about ourselves. The information-gathering procedure also relies on this ability to pay careful attention to everything.

This phrase "pay careful attention to everything" could serve as a summary of Ignatius' suggested procedure for a discernment – to become aware, insofar as possible, of all the external factors which can or might affect the decision, and to one's own internal feelings and thoughts, and in and through these to become aware of the Spirit of God. Once again, he calls upon the imagination: Imagine the possible action (or situation), then carefully consider the probable benefits and disadvantages of doing that; and inversely, imagine the probable benefits and disadvantages of not doing that. These evaluative considerations are based on observation, on what one has seen and heard and now thinks about. But all kinds of data count as input for consideration. Ignatius also wants the discerning person to be alert to her or his feelings -- feelings of attraction, joy, fear, anxiety, and so forth. At this point the humble self-awareness mentioned earlier becomes crucial, if one is going to name and assess these feelings correctly.

The result of a discernment is supposed to be a "decision for action." When one decides to pursue the greater good (in Ignatius' phrase, the greater glory of God) through some particular action, she is cooperating with God's overarching intention to love and redeem all. Although this might sound like the "end" of a discernment, the process actually never ends, for the result of every decision becomes the data toward the next discernment.

Such openness to the unfolding of experience is evident in Ignatius' biography: When circumstances impinged on his plans, he was able to free himself from his own desires and to move in another direction. Those instances illustrate another consequence of inner freedom – a spirit of flexibility. The story of the Jesuits, in that first generation with Ignatius and throughout their long history, includes several examples of accommodation to various cultures and to historical vicissitudes. This readiness to be flexible is one of the fruits of the habit of discernment.

The occasional process of making a major decision, which involves data-gathering, prayer and evaluation, is supported by the daily practice of reviewing one's life. It is this kind of regular practice which develops the habit of discernment. Ignatius counseled that retreatants and non-retreatants alike should adopt what has traditionally been called the "examen" or "examination of conscience." Jesuits today have renamed this practice the "examination of consciousness," and present it as a practice of reflecting on the content of one's awareness. The more one becomes alert to God's presence in the exterior and interior world, the more ready one is to undertake a major decision for action.

There are several passages in the primitive documents of the Sisters of St. Joseph which reflect the spirit of discernment. The sister seeks God's will, which is communicated by the movements of grace: "Be very faithful to the grace of the Holy Spirit, listening to him attentively, obeying him promptly and entirely..." (Maxim 15) In the Formula for Vows recorded in the Primitive Constitutions, the sister expresses her desire to live entirely for God and to "depend entirely on [God's] grace." That will is dependable precisely because it comes from a loving God: "Recognize and cherish tenderly this very loving will in all that happens in your life, whatever this may be..." (Maxim 19). Especially when things are difficult, the sister is counseled to "hope with a firm confidence...that God...will effect in you and through you his holy and loving will, and live perfectly at peace with this hope" (Maxim 31).

A few times Medaille cautions the sisters not to be "overeager" about knowing what they should do, but to be patient and peaceful even while remaining open. As Maxim 84 advises, "Never go ahead of grace by an imprudent eagerness, but quietly await its movements, and, when it comes to you, go along with it with great gentleness, humility, fidelity and courage."

The "indifference" which is the sign of interior freedom necessary for discernment is clearly described in Maxim 72, and appears elsewhere as "detachment." We hear the voice of both Ignatius and Francis in the maxim:

"Be always ready to obey peacefully, indifferent to all that is not against God's will: to live or to die, to be healthy or ill, happy or unhappy, loved or persecuted, finding always your complete contentment solely in fulfilling God's will" (Maxim 72).

Not every passage is as balanced as this one. Some of the references to utter detachment, especially in the invitation to be "dead to themselves and to everything" (Constitutions II,1; and Maxim 5), could sound like unhealthy self-denigration. Those passages need to be considered along with the image of a loving God who wills good for everyone.

Not only the documents but also the history of the sisters offers examples of their discerning disposition. They decided which works of charity they were called to do by observing the social and religious needs of people, by attending to the requests of others, by assessing their own abilities for certain tasks. Sometimes they initiated a service, such as teaching women lacemaking as a protection against dire poverty and prostitution. Frequently a church or civic leader asked the sisters to oversee the care of the poor in a hospital or teach the children catechism. In seventeenth century France, especially in rural towns and villages, both "hospital" and "classroom" were far more primitive than what we would think of today when we hear those words. Professional preparation was not required, but dedication, good sense, and "on-the-job learning" sufficed. But of course with the passage of time, standards for various kinds of social

service developed; and the CSJs' discerning response led them to undertake better preparation for those ministries.

The period of the French Revolution also demonstrates the awareness, realism and flexibility of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The Revolution moved against monasteries first, but did not immediately outlaw nuns and congregations of sisters because society relied on them for "public assistance," i.e. running hospitals and other charitable establishments. Even after the formal suppression of religious congregations in 1790, some groups of sisters managed to stay together for a while. However, in the face of opposition and persecution, eventually all the communities dispersed or went into hiding. But from the perspective of later history, we can see that even that "decision for action" was not absolutely final. Many of those sisters discerned the invitation of the Holy Spirit in the changed situation several years later, and were ready to re-join the "second foundation" of Sisters of St. Joseph.

The sisters' spirit of discerning flexibility is likewise evident in their decision to go on the new mission to the St. Louis territory. Describing Madame de la Rochejaquelein's desire to fund a group of sisters for this new mission, Sr. Patricia Byrne says,

"The countess' visions of an evangelizing enterprise were rooted in her confidence in the ability of the Sisters of St. Joseph to adjust to America, which she rightly associated with the flexibility of their rule and the diversity of their occupations. [In the countess' words,] *'They give themselves to all the works of mercy, they take charge of free schools or boarding schools, hospitals, asylums for foundlings or for the aged; they may look after prisoners; attend on the poor and the sick in their homes; take care of the infected – they are ready for anything'*" (Byrne 225-26)

A Practical Spirituality

I have chosen this adjective "practical" to highlight two aspects of the Ignatian-Salesian spirituality of the Sisters of St. Joseph. After the Council of Trent, the Catholic church stressed the "practice" of one's faith in good works. Renewed attention to the mystery of the Incarnation, and respect for the capability of the human person, were surely impulses behind Catholicism's emphasis on all forms of charitable service. We have already seen Ignatius' personal desire to cooperate in the work of Christ by doing whatever seemed best. Francis de Sales focused less on the aspiration toward "doing more" for "the greater glory of God," than on doing every small thing for the love of God. The Salesian attitudes of humility and simplicity were consistent with "small" but nevertheless "practical" works of charity.

CSJ spirituality clearly linked faith and prayer with practical service. Like Jesus, they were to be "ardently zealous"; and like Joseph, they were to give "cordial service" to the neighbor. "By means of these works," says the primitive Constitutions, "the sisters of Saint Joseph will bring numerous souls to salvation and perfection, aiding them in the practice of virtue" (II).

My second use of the term "practical" highlights a respect for the limitations of reality. One's intentions, no matter how admirable or worthwhile, have to be actually achievable. Ignatius' own history includes an interesting example of this: During his long period of

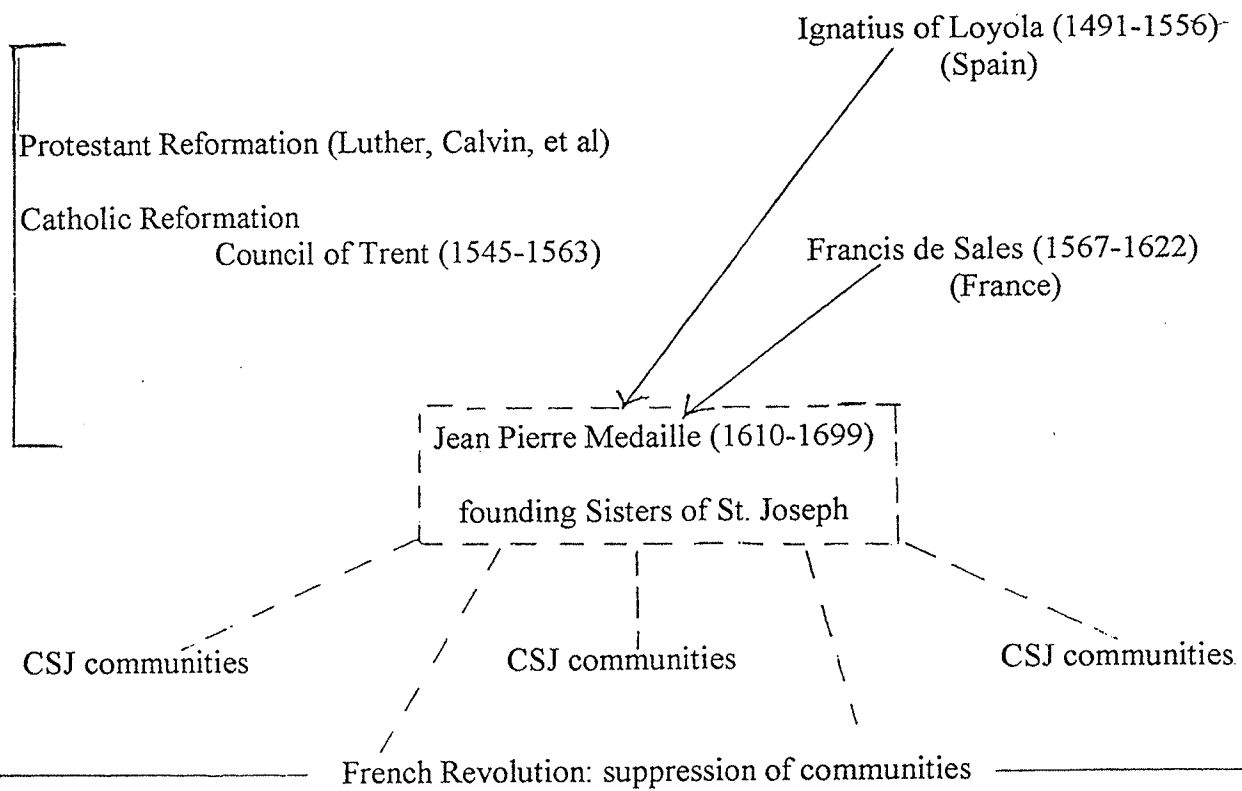
meditation at Manresa, he had resolved to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and to stay there - visiting the holy places and "helping souls." But after Ignatius finally got there, the provincial of the Franciscans decided that he could not stay in Jerusalem. In spite of Ignatius' "firm intention" to stay, eventually he obeyed the provincial (Autobiography pars. 45-48). In the end, his apparently good decision could not be carried out in the real world, and that fact became for him the first step toward another discernment.

As several stories from their history indicate, Sisters of St. Joseph showed themselves to be "practical" in this sense. They were realistic about what could and could not be accomplished, and apparently understood possibilities and limitations to be indicators of God's will. A significant phrase in this chapter from the Constitutions conveys that practical acceptance of reality: "In honor of Jesus, so wholly zealous for the glory of God his Father, and for the salvation of souls, they shall manifest great zeal for the advancement, *as far as possible*, of the greater glory of God and the salvation and perfection of their neighbor" (II, II; emphasis added).

In sum, then, we can characterize the spirituality of the Sisters of St. Joseph, as that can be discovered in their early documents and history, to be 1) incarnational, 2) discerning, and practical. To this we can add the "orientation toward excellence tempered by gentleness" which was discussed by Kathleen McCluskey at the previous national conference in 1998.

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"Refounding" of CSJ community in early 1800s, credited to Sr. St. John Fontbonne

mission to St. Louis Territory
1836

establishment of CSJ colleges
beginning in 1920s

*Consensus Statement of the Central Ideas
of Jean Pierre Medaille, S.J.
found in the Primitive Constitutions*

Stimulated by the Holy Spirit of Love and receptive to His inspirations

*The Sister of Saint Joseph moves always towards
profound love of God
and
love of neighbor without distinction*

*from whom she does not separate herself
and
for whom, in the following of Christ
she works to achieve unity
both of neighbor with neighbor
and neighbor with God
directly in this apostolate
and
indirectly through works of charity*

*in humility – the spirit of the Incarnate Word
Philippians 2:5-11*

*in sincere charity (cordial charité) – the manner of
Saint Joseph whose name she bears*

*in an Ignatian-Salesian climate: that is, with an
orientation toward excellence
(le dépassement, le plus)
tempered by gentleness (doceur), peace, joy*