

School Sisters of Notre Dame Celebrate 150 Years

By Sr. Ann Habershaw, SSND

"Alle werke Gottes gehen leidvoll..." "All the works of God proceed slowly and in pain; therefore their roots are sturdier, and their flowering the lovelier."

These words written over a 100 years ago by Mother Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, became her motto and continue to inspire her daughters as they celebrate on Oct. 24, the 150th anniversary of their foundation. In those years the roots have become sturdy and have flowered bountifully. The congregation which began in a small town of Bavaria with Mother Theresa and two other young women now numbers more than 8,000 sisters and is present in 33 countries and regions throughout the world.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame this year celebrate the 150th anniversary of their founding, Oct. 24. Next year, the congregation will have been in the diocese for 130 years.

structing them in the spiritual life according to that vision. They had also gained the support of Ludwig I who had become king of Bavaria in 1825. On Oct. 24, 1833, Caroline became Mary Theresa of Jesus; she and her two companions established a convent at Neunberg vorm Wald. Bishop Wittman, however, did not live to see the fulfillment of his dream, and Father Job died only four months after the foundation. Mother Mary Theresa remained to enfold the vision and bring it to fruition.

Wittman and Job both believed that education was

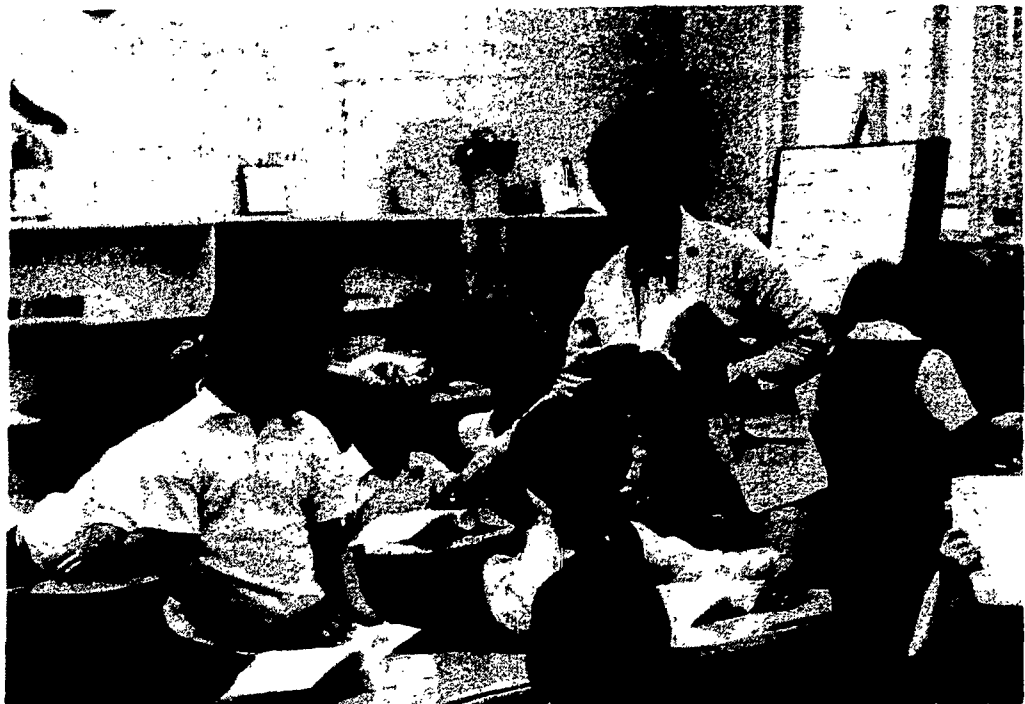
schools, homes for abandoned children, refuges, and allotted portions of convents for women's retreats. The present constitution reaffirms education as the ministry of the congregation. "For us, education means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God's image and assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth."

Sisters implies not merely the title by which members are known, but a fundamental call to community. Mother Theresa took for her model the unity of the early Christian community as recorded in the "Acts of the Apostles." She frequently challenged her sisters to be of one heart and one soul for in such unity one could derive strength for the ministry. She wrote to the sisters, "Let us look upon one another as members of one body, hasten to each other's aid, be built up by one another."

Her understanding of unity as had been expressed by her mentor, Wittman, caused her some of her greatest sufferings. The constitution called for a strong central government under the jurisdiction of a superior general. Such a plan was not generally accepted within the Church of the time for congregations of religious women. In the 1850s the archbishop of Munich instructed Mother Theresa that she was not to decide or order anything without his authorization. He further outlined a revision of the rule which favored the erection of independent diocesan motherhouses which should be directed by the clergy appointed by the bishop and only responsible to him. This was clearly contrary to her vision and that of Wittman, so Mother Theresa petitioned the Holy See and received approval for the type of government designed for the congregation. As the congregation spread into other cultures unity was also threatened. During World War II communication between German and American sisters was halted and sisters recall their concern about a permanent rent in the congregation. But the centralized government has persisted. A general superior is elected every five years by a General Chapter representing sisters from throughout the world; the the Generalate is located in Rome. Because of the size of the congregation, the sisters are organized into provinces under the authority of an elected provincial leader. There are eight North American provinces, three South American provinces and 10 provinces in Europe.

Notre Dame is the name of the suppressed congregation which Wittman hoped to re-found. Mother Theresa considered Mary a model of the congregation and saw in Mary's words, "Do whatever he tells you," a call to ministry. To a final vow class of 1876, she wrote, "Mary offered herself in the temple of the Lord. She did this with all her heart, gave herself unreservedly to the Lord, and never once took back anything of the sacrifice. Let us follow her noble and illustrious example."

In her establishment of the Poor School Sisters of Notre



Sister Marie Clare Stoe, SSND, teaches religion at Holy Ghost School. The congregation has been at Holy Ghost since 1918.

Dame, Mother Mary Theresa emphasized a simple lifestyle which made her sisters available to the poor, ministry through education, a strong unity, and emulation of Mary.

After its foundation the congregation spread rapidly throughout Bavaria and neighboring countries. Although there were many new members, the demand continually outweighed the supply. In 1845, the Redemptorist provincial asked the King of Bavaria if he could intercede in getting sisters to minister to the growing number of German immigrants in the U.S. He applied to Mother Theresa who decided that America's needs were great and asked for volunteers to begin missions there. With six sisters, Mother Theresa arrived in New York on July 30, 1847, and made her way to St. Mary's, Pennsylvania, to establish a school. Shortly thereafter, they began schools in Baltimore, Maryland, and became well acquainted with the Redemptorist Provincial, St. John Neumann, who was instrumental in the spread of the congregation in the U.S. In a letter written in July, 1848, John Neumann describes traveling 2,400 miles with Mother Theresa and Sister Caroline Freiss, who was later given responsibility for the American missions, to visit the parishes entrusted to the Redemptorist Fathers. He mentions stopping in Rochester and discussing plans for the establishment of a girls' school. In the fall of 1854, the sisters began teaching the girls' classes at St. Joseph School in downtown Rochester. During the next several years, they were given missions in other German schools in Rochester: St. Peter (1855), St. Boniface (1866), Holy Family (1867), Holy Redeemer (1867), and St. Michael (1874). Missions were established in many areas where German immigrants had settled: Milwaukee, New York City, Detroit, Buffalo, St. Louis, Belleville (Ill.), New Orleans, Mankato (MI). By the time of Mother Theresa's death in 1879, there were 1,000 sisters and 250 candidates in 126 schools and orphanages in the U.S. More than 1,000 were ministering in Europe.

As the sisters in America tried to respond to the needs of the later 19th century, they saw the necessity for modification of the rule on two particular points. The rule forbade the teaching of

boys by sisters and the rule required that sisters live in a residence adjoining school and church so they would not go out into the street. Sister Caroline brought the problem to Mother Theresa who had returned to Germany, but did not find a listening ear. She finally was able to explain the differences required in America and the modifications were made. Throughout its history the congregation has had to learn that its formation of a constitution must be universal, must embrace a variety of cultures.

Taking the example of Mother Theresa, when the North American Provinces became established, they sent missionaries to other lands, some of whom have also become missionary. Missionaries from the U.S. began establishing schools in Puerto Rico in 1915; this fall the Puerto Rican sisters are sending missionaries to Santo Domingo. Japanese sisters are sending missionaries to Nepal. Other sisters from North America are missionaries in Central and South America and in Africa. The Wilton, CT, province which includes Rochester as well as New England and New Jersey has missions in Peru, Chile, and Liberia, West Africa.

At the present time, 42 School Sisters of Notre Dame live and minister in the Diocese of Rochester. Changes in economics closed several of the schools which had been the traditional ministry of the sisters. The congregation continues to have sisters teaching in parish schools at Holy Ghost (Coldwater), St. Boniface,

St. Margaret Mary, Holy Family, and St. Philip Neri, and in Bishop Kearney High School. Because of changing needs and the talents of individuals, several sisters serve in a variety of ministries in the Rochester area. Sister Roberta Tierney is the diocesan director of Education and Sister Muriel Curran is Vicar for Religious in the diocese. Sister M. Loreto Reynolds is coordinator of religious education at St. Agnes, Avon. Positions as pastoral assistants are held by Sisters Carol Datz and M. Norbert Gutacker at St. Colomba/St. Patrick, Caledonia, and St. Michael/Holy Redeemer, Rochester, respectively. Sister Bernardine Bosco is parish secretary at Holy Family, Rochester. Recently, Sister Mary Margaret Fitzpatrick assumed a chaplaincy position at Strong Memorial Hospital.

At a conference held in Milwaukee during this summer, Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, general superior, addressed the 500 SSND delegates from the North American Provinces. Behind her stood a picture of Mother Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger. Sister Mary Margaret recalled that at the 17th General Chapter held in fall 1982, there had been a commitment to a communal response to violence. She asked them to foster life and to promote unity and collaboration in all their relationships. Finally, she challenged them, "Bring Christian hope to a world marked by violence...for...this is the way to celebrate and proclaim our 150th year of foundation."



Sister Roberta Tierney, SSND, diocesan director of the Department of Education.



Sister Patricia Fitzpatrick, SSND, right, a chaplain in the pediatrics unit at Strong Memorial Hospital, confers with Martha Castillijo, RN.

Caroline (later Mother Mary Theresa) Gerhardinger was born in 1797 in the little town of Stadtamhof, Bavaria, and attended a convent school conducted by the Congregation of Notre Dame founded in Lorraine. Political upheaval prevailed as Napoleon created the Confederation of the Rhine. At this time was ordered the secularization of many teaching religious orders in Bavaria. Caroline completed the elementary school course one month after the Congregation of Notre Dame had been forced to leave. A few years later Caroline became a teacher in the school at Stadtamhof, a position she held until 1833.

Following the Napoleonic Wars, socioeconomic conditions in Bavaria were poor. Lower class people experienced an instability in family life and were considered by the middle class to be immoral. There was no provision for the education of the poor. As early as 1818, George Michael Wittman, rector and later bishop of Regensburg, had begun plans for the reestablishment of the Notre Dame cloister at Stadtamhof. He shared this vision with Father Francis Sebastian Job who formulated the "Spirit of the Constitutions," borrowing from the "Rule of St. Augustine" and the constitution of the suppressed congregation and adding to it a new vision to respond to the needs of the time. Both men shared their vision with young Caroline and two other teachers and began in-

the answer to the social ills of the time. In their vision, the renewal of society depended upon the Christian family in which the mother was the primary influence on the formation of values. Therefore, the ministry of the congregation was to educate girls and young women. They envisioned an institute which would be different from the large, formal monasteries; it would send its members out by two's and three's throughout the country.

Perhaps the vision can best be summarized by considering the name of the congregation, Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame. The sisters were to live poorly and simply enough so that they could be welcomed anywhere. They were to minister particularly to the poor because they were in greatest need. The present constitution reiterates this vision inspired by Mother Theresa, "In her spirit we respond to God's call expressed in our times. Like her, we exclude no one from our concern, but are especially sensitive to the needs of youth and women and are impelled to serve the poor."

The word 'school' in the congregation's name indicates its primary apostolate, that of education. Although the establishment of formal schools for education in the faith and education for life predominated, even in Mother Theresa's time there was diversification of ministries according to need. She also established orphanages, vocational

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