

School Sisters mark the feast of their foundress with liturgy

By Father Robert F. McNamara

On November 17, 1985, Pope Paul II formally beatified Mother Mary Theresa Gerhardinger, foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The pope assigned May 9 as the official feastday of the new "Blessed." Hence, on May 9, 1986, School Sisters all over the world observed this liturgical feast for the first time ever.

The 30 Sisters of Notre Dame who now work in the Diocese of Rochester organized a special Mass on May 9 which was celebrated at St. Bridget's Church at 5:30 p.m. Father Robert C. Bradler, diocesan director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, celebrated the Mass. Father Bradler is one of the many local alumni of the School Sisters, who have been serving this diocese for over 130 years. The Sisters chose St. Bridget's for their Mass because it is a center for the poor, to whom their Mother Foundress was so dedicated.

Our Rochester-based Notre Dame nuns have two special reasons for rejoicing on May 9.

In the first place, Blessed Theresa herself authorized the foundation of her community's first seven parish schools in this diocese, although it was her American representative, Mother Caroline Friess, who actually opened the convents. The schools were: St. Joseph's School and Orphanage (1854); St. Peter and



The 31 School Sisters of Notre Dame who live in the Diocese of Rochester pause for a photograph after a Mass celebrating the feast day of their foundress, Mother Mary Theresa Gerhardinger, who is depicted in the painting, center.

Paul School (1855); Sacred Heart School, Perkinsville, N.Y., (1858-1869); St. Boniface

School (1866); Holy Family School (1867); Holy Redeemer School (1867); and St. Michael's School (1873). These were German-language parishes, of course. The School Sisters first came to America to teach the daughters of German immigrants.

The second reason for rejoicing is that Blessed Mary Theresa herself visited Rochester in 1848, six years before she opened her first convent here. Blessed Mary Theresa (born Karolina) Gerhardinger was born on June 20, 1796, at Stadtahof in the Kingdom of Bavaria. Her father Willibald, a shipmaster on the Danube River, was prosperous enough to send his only child to a local convent school. The teachers were members of a cloistered order called the Augustinian Canonesses of the Congregation of Notre Dame. They were a pioneering order of teaching sisters founded in France in 1598 by St. Peter Fourier and Blessed Alix Le Clerc.

Karolina won her elementary diploma in 1809. Shortly afterward, the Bavarian government, influenced by the secularist philosophy on the Enlightenment, shut down the school and broke up the community of nuns.

Father Michael Wittman, the admirable rector of the cathedral at Regensburg, was grieved by the closing of the school and the suppression of the sisters. He determined to reopen it with lay teachers and then eventually to re-establish the Congregation of Notre Dame.

He chose three alumnae as his first lay teachers. One of these was Karolina. She won her government teacher's certificate at the age of 15, and quickly proved to be an excellent teacher. Three years later she told Father Wittman that she was interested in taking the veil. It was then that he delightedly revealed to her his dream of restoring the congregation to teach the rural poor.

When Wittman was made bishop of Regensburg, the outlook for his project became even better. With the aid of Fathers Matthias Siegert and Sebastian Job, he worked out a rule for the revived congregation. It would remain faithful to the spirit of St. Peter Fourier, but the regulations would be somewhat altered. The requirement of a cloister had to be modified to allow the sisters greater mobility. All members throughout the world would be under the direct supervision of the mother general. Bishop Wittman also stressed the spirit of poverty that the nuns should cultivate. Indeed, the official title of their order would be "The Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame."

Bishop Wittman and Father Job both died before the project could be launched, but Father Siegert and Karolina were able to carry out the master plan which had been so

Area boys' interfaith choir is scheduling auditions

Auditions for prospective boy choristers, as well as for tenors and basses, are currently being scheduled for the newly organized Cathedral Choir School.

Boys, ages eight to 11 years, who enroll in the new choir school will begin their training during an intensive two-week period this summer and will meet weekly during the school year. During a student's four-to-six year tenure, he will progress through the internationally acclaimed training program developed by the Royal School of Church Music (England) — moving from probationer's to full chorister's status.

carefully laid. On March 23, 1833, the great-hearted King Ludwig I of Bavaria authorized the opening of a school at Neunburg vorm Wald. On the following November 16, Karolina, now aged 40, took her perpetual vows. She chose as her religious name Maria Theresa of Jesus, in honor of St. Teresa of Jesus of Avila. That was also the name chosen by Blessed Alix Le Clerc, foundress of the original Congregation of Notre Dame.

The revived order quickly won acclaim for its educational skill. Appeals for teachers came in from all over Germany. Fortunately, many young women also applied for admission to the sisterhood. (By 1873 the number of School Sisters reached 2,500.) In 1841, the motherhouse was moved from Neunburg to Munich.

In the late 1840s, Blessed Theresa was invited to open a school in the United States — at St. Mary's City, a newly founded settlement for German immigrants in Elk County, northwestern Pennsylvania.

Encouraged by the archbishop of Munich and the Ludwig Mission Society, Mother Theresa accepted the offer. She picked five young sisters for the task (including Sister Caroline Friess). They left Munich on June 18, 1847, and sailed from Bremen, accompanied by a representative of the colony's entrepreneurs, Baron Gotlieb von Schroeter, a devout but rather Utopian convert and artist. It was a hard crossing, and the foundress was deathly seasick most of the way. They reached New York on July 30.

When Mother Theresa met the German Redemptorists in New York, they gave her the discouraging advice that St. Mary's was too "back country" to be a good location for a motherhouse. She went to Baltimore to seek a "second opinion" from Father John Nepomucene Neumann, American superior of the Redemptorist Fathers. He gave her the same answer. True to her promise, however, Theresa opened her first American school in a log cabin at St. Mary's on September 22, 1847. In October, she opened a second school in Baltimore and set up her central house in that more-accessible city.

The two foundations had scarcely been made when Bishop John M. Henni of Milwaukee urged Blessed Theresa to relocate the motherhouse in his city. This offer necessitated a trip to Wisconsin. Therefore, in April, 1848, the foundress set out with Sister Caroline. Father Neumann accompanied them. He had already planned a visitation of all the Redemptorist parishes, and Mother Mary Theresa had promised to give a priority to the Redemptorist parochial schools. Having conducted their business in Milwaukee, the three travelers went back east through Detroit, Buffalo, Rochester, New York and Philadelphia, arriving home at Baltimore on June 29.

When she boarded the "Washington" at New York on July 20 for the trip back to Europe, Mother Theresa had already established a sure beachhead in America for her religious community. Though she herself would never cross the Atlantic again, she left her American foundations in the capable hands of Sister Caroline Friess.

The detailed correspondence of Sister Mary Theresa shows her to have been a skilled pedagogue, an able organizer, and a prudent governor. In her were combined industry, zeal, superbly good judgment and, at the same time, a rich vein of Christian devotion, patience and fortitude. Truly a valiant woman!

The foundress died on May 9, 1879. From the day of her burial to the present, her devoted sisters have prayed to her rather than for her. Now Pope John Paul II has confirmed their veneration by raising her to the honors of the altar.

Therefore, on the occasion of the first liturgical feastday of Blessed Mary Theresa, the whole diocese of Rochester congratulates her spiritual daughters and joins them in spirit in their joyful observance.



HER COFFIN: THE GARBAGE CAN

THE HOLY FATHER'S MISSION AID TO THE ORIENTAL CHURCH

HOW MANY MORE?

The Sister was moving among the slums of a city in India. Unbelievably, she heard sobbing coming from a trash barrel. Brushing aside the flies and the vermin, she looked. Beneath the filth and debris was an old lady crying from tearless eyes as her life slowly ebbed away. Tenderly the Sister lifted her, placed her on her shoulders and took her to the Hospice for the Dying. Before she died, the old lady told the Sister, "I'm not crying because I was in the garbage. I'm crying because my son put me there. He had to. There was not enough food for the family." ... Tragically, this scene will be replayed many more times. But you can help to lessen it. Will you? Here is how...

WILL YOU HELP?

☐ In the hands of our native Sisters your gift in any amount (\$100, \$75, \$50, \$25, \$10, \$5, \$2, \$1) will fill empty stomachs with rice, fish, milk, vegetables

☐ Our priests can start a model farm for their parishioners and teach them how to increase their crop production for only \$975. We will tell you where it is located

☐ \$15 a week will enable an aged person to spend his or her declining years with simple dignity cared for by our Sisters.

THEY HELP THEMSELVES

The Victory Centre for Women, at Guruvayoor, is conducted by the Franciscan Clarist Sisters; it is specifically for the rehabilitation of handicapped girls and women. The building they now live in is old, has no ventilation, and is actually dangerous for them. Both the Sisters and the women they serve are financially unable to construct the training and lodging centre required for the work with handicapped and deaf students. They need \$6,000. Would you help to provide a future for them? Why not do it in honor of someone you love, perhaps as a family project?

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