

Milestones

School Sisters celebrate 150 years in U.S.

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

The dream of a 19th-century German bishop and a young Bavarian schoolteacher has been a reality in the United States now for some 150 years.

And the Diocese of Rochester has been a part of that reality for nearly as long.

In 1854 the School Sisters of Notre Dame began teaching at St. Joseph's School in Rochester — just 21 years after Karolina Gerhardinger (Blessed Mother Theresa of Jesus) established the teaching congregation that she and Bishop George Wittman of Bavaria had envisioned, and seven years after members of the congregation had arrived in this country.

Mother Theresa journeyed to the United States in 1847 with five sisters and began to teach the children of German immigrants in Baltimore. They served in the Diocese of Rochester initially in such predominantly German parishes as St. Joseph's, Ss. Peter and Paul's, St. Boniface and Holy Redeemer, all in Rochester.

Since that time, the congregation has grown to more than 5,500 members serving in 36 nations. That number includes approximately 3,000 in the United States and Canada, according to Sister Brenda Lynch, SSND, communications director for the Rochester-affiliated Wilton (Conn.) Province of the congregation.

Although their primary ministry remains in education, School Sisters also serve in parishes, hospitals and social service agencies.

In the Diocese of Rochester, for example, members of the congregation teach at Bishop Kearney High in Irondequoit, School of the Holy Childhood (for developmentally disabled students) in Henrietta and at several diocesan schools. They also serve in pastoral ministry in a number of diocesan parishes, and at St. Andrew's Center, a foster care facility in Irondequoit.

"Our three major charisms are

to the poor, young women and especially to young women in need," explained Sister Roberta Tierney, SSND, parish life coordinator at St. Cecilia's Parish, Irondequoit.

When its roots were being set in the 1820s, the congregation's initial charism was indeed to serve women.

The future Bishop Wittman was at that time a priest in Stadthof, Bavaria. He was serving as the spiritual guide for Gerhardinger, whose family he knew. The two shared a vision for educating young women.

Bishop Wittman died before the congregation became a reality in 1833. But Gerhardinger and a priest friend of the bishop's organized the congregation and created a rule.

One part of the rule set the new congregation apart from many others at that time: Rather than being directly under the authority of the bishop of each diocese where members of the congregation served, the School Sisters would have a strong central administration. Thus while the SSNDs in the Diocese of Rochester are part of the Wilton Province, the general motherhouse for the congregation is in Rome.

The result of this, Sister Tierney noted, is diversity within the congregation as members from different parts of the country, and even nations, mix.

"I think that broadens our vision and gives us the ability to understand different cultures and different traditions," Sister Tierney observed.



The staff of Holy Family School, Rochester, poses around 1921 (standing, left to right), Sr. Rogata, Sr. Antonella, Sr. Alverus, Sr. Dignata, Sr. Hermanda, Sr. Vitus, Sr. Gebhardt; (seated, left to right) Sr. Obdulia and Sr. Norbert. SSNDs began teaching at the school in 1867.

Initially, however, when the congregation came to this country it was intent on serving one group: German immigrants. When Mother Theresa and her five sisters arrived in 1847, St. John Neumann, superior of the Redemptorists in the United States, found them a house in Baltimore.

Soon the sisters began to work with Redemptorist priests who were working with German immigrants. Mother Theresa and Sister Mary Caroline Friess — who in 1850 at age 26 would become the superior of the American branch of the congregation — began to travel around with the saint visiting Redemptorist parishes.

A 1961 history of St. Joseph's Parish, Rochester, notes that in mid-June 1848, St. Neumann "stopped here for a day in the company of two nuns from Munich: Mother Theresa and Sister Caroline of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. As superior general of the Redemptorists in America, he was taking them on an extensive tour of the Order's foundations to give them first-hand assurance that in the United States there would be work aplenty for all the teaching nuns that could be sent from overseas."

Just six years after that visit, School Sisters arrived at St. Joseph's School to begin teaching girls. The following year, they began teaching at Ss. Peter and Paul School, in 1866 at St. Boniface School and in 1867 at Holy Family School.

Although St. Joseph's School is now closed, St. Boniface and Holy Family Schools are still open, and still have School Sisters of Notre Dame as principals. Sister Mary Smith, SSND, St. Boniface's principal, noted proudly that the two schools are also the two oldest continuous Catholic schools in the city of Rochester.

Sister Caroline, who became Mother Caroline in 1850, had decided early on to open SSND-operated schools to other than German students, Sister Lynch observed.

"She opened schools to blacks, Native Americans, Polish, Bohemians," Sister Lynch noted. "In fact, she was one of the first who took these girls into their congregations."

Mother Caroline took flak for this openness, but that did not deter her, Sister Lynch observed. She was by all accounts a formidable woman.

"She had conviction," Sister Lynch remarked. "One bishop was angry at her. He said, 'Don't you know I'm bishop so-and-so?' She said, 'Don't you realize I'm Mother Caroline?'"

That sense of "conviction" apparently paid off. By the time of Mother Caroline's death in 1896, the School Sisters had grown in the United States to include

three provinces and 2,000 sisters. They operated some 200 schools in 30 dioceses.

In addition, the congregation opened the Collegiate Institute in 1871 to provide advanced education for women. In 1895, the institute became the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, the first Catholic college for women in the United States.

The congregation continued to serve primarily in teaching ministry until the Second Vatican Council. Following the council, all congregations began to reassess their ministries, Sister Lynch noted. The School Sisters went back and read what Mother Theresa had written — including, for the first time, letters finally translated from German.

"As sisters started reading her, they got a stronger sense of the charism (of the congregation)," she said. "That was to meet the needs of the times. At that time (in the 19th century) it was for education."

Members are still involved in education, Sister Lynch said, but not necessarily in formal classrooms. In Baltimore in 1993, for example, the School Sisters, in conjunction with five other congregations, opened Mother Seton Academy, a middle school for at-risk students. And in the fall of 1996, the Wilton Province opened Caroline Center to help immigrant women learn English and gain job skills.

Meanwhile, SSNDs have worked in Third World nations to open schools, to provide catechesis and to help people develop community service projects.

"I think our community was formed to serve a specific need at a specific time, as the times change and the needs change, so we have changed," Sister Smith said. "As the needs arise, the sisters try to meet the needs."

The congregation has planned several celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America.

The Wilton Province has scheduled a celebration at the motherhouse on June 14.

A second celebration has been scheduled for June 19-22 at the College of Notre Dame in Maryland.

The congregation will also commemorate the arrival in North America of Mother Theresa with a July 31 celebration at Battery Park in New York City.

Finally, the anniversary will be noted Nov. 1 during an international gathering of the School Sisters in Chicago.



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