

The Courage to Venture: Oldenburg Franciscans, 1851 - 2017

Demonstrating her courage to venture, 24 year-old Sr. Theresa (Genevieve) Hackelmeier made the “arduous journey” by sea, canal, river, and overland to a log cabin in the small Indiana village of Oldenburg, arriving alone on January 6, 1851, the Feast of the Epiphany. Another Sister from her Vienna, Austria, convent had agreed to be her companion in the mission Sr. Theresa was undertaking—to establish a new congregation of Sisters who would assist in the education of German immigrant children residing in Southeastern Indiana. That Sister, apparently overwhelmed by the journey and the task, had turned back, so Sister Theresa undertook the mission alone. By the time of her arrival, three women from the Oldenburg area had volunteered to join her in establishing the Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg, IN.

Fr. Francis Joseph Rudolf, missionary pastor of Holy Family Church in Oldenburg, had long sought to establish such a congregation, one which would eventually teach both in German and English. After two failed attempts, he enlisted the help of a friend, Franciscan Fr. Ambrose Buchmeier, of New York, and Fr. Alphonsus Strebitzky, Franciscan Provincial in Vienna, and they invited the Sister(s) from Vienna to undertake such a task.

Assuring the American identity of the Oldenburg foundation, Mother Theresa severed all ties with her Vienna convent. Because of this fact, and possibly due to Mother Theresa’s reluctance to talk or write about herself, and losses of documentation in a convent fire in 1857, little is known regarding her history, other than her date of birth and the fact that she had been a Sister for nine years in a Vienna convent. Evidence gathered recently strongly suggests that she was a member of a community of vowed religious Sisters who were nurses. Though well known for their good works in Vienna, this young congregation did not receive full ecclesiastical approval until 1857, and so their names are not listed in any known records.

Within six months after the founding, Theresia Dreer, a gifted, well-educated German woman, arrived from Switzerland to join the new community. Mother Theresa, recognizing the newcomer’s talents, put the new arrival (now Sister Antonia) in charge of the community school opened in Oldenburg in September, 1851. In the following year, Mother Theresa appointed Sister Antonia director of an academy established for girls from the area. The new academy included the six boarders who by this time lived with the Sisters in the stone convent built within months after Mother Theresa’s arrival.. Sister (later Mother) Antonia also assumed the task of training the Sisters, many of whom had little education, to be teachers.

A short three years after the founding of the congregation, Fr. Rudolph asked Mother Theresa to accept the care of a number of orphan girls from the area, some of whom had lost parents in a cholera epidemic in the late 1840s. This ministry to orphans, beginning with 11 girls, grew and lasted 11 years; it would be the first of several ventures in caring for orphans undertaken later on in the Congregation’s history.

In addition to the educational ministry and the care of orphans, the Sisters maintained a garden (later a farm) presided over by Sister (later Mother) Michaela Lindemann, one of the

first three women who awaited Mother Theresa's coming in 1851. The Sisters also maintained perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament within their chapel. In 1864, the Bishop, apparently concerned about the health of the Sisters, requested that both care of orphans and perpetual adoration be discontinued, and the Sisters reluctantly complied.

The Oldenburg Sisters were soon being asked to help establish and staff schools in neighboring Indiana towns. The convent in Oldenburg became a Motherhouse from which the Sisters traveled throughout southern Indiana to do the work of education, returning each summer for further training and spiritual retreat.

Mother Theresa died in 1860, after nine short years in this country, and was succeeded by Sister (now Mother) Antonia. By that time, the Oldenburg Sisters had reached beyond Indiana to establish Holy Trinity School in St. Louis. They had also met the challenges of rebuilding and enlarging their facilities at Oldenburg, after a devastating fire of 1857 had destroyed their convent. In the years following, the Franciscan Sisters accepted requests to establish schools in Kentucky (1861), Indianapolis (1864), Cincinnati (1876), and other Ohio locations, as well as Missouri, Illinois, and Kansas.

Under the leadership of Mother Olivia Brockman, from 1884 to 1920, the Sisters continued to be pioneers in the field of education. From the 1850's, the Sisters had qualified for teaching by passing the state's education examination. Their own teacher training school, St. Francis Normal, was accredited by the Indiana State Board of Education in 1910. As early as 1911, the Oldenburg community sent its Sisters to Marquette and other Catholic colleges for academic degrees. Several parish schools included commercial classes for girls after their eighth year to assist young women in broadening their job opportunities.

The Sisters of St. Francis have long maintained a responsive engagement with the social conditions of the time. In 1892, the Sisters opened St. Ann's, the only school for African-American children in then segregated city of Indianapolis, Indiana. It has since been succeeded by St. Rita's and was the first of many African-American schools our Sisters staffed in other cities—notably Kansas City, MO, and Cincinnati, OH.

In 1935, the Sisters responded to an invitation to missionary work among the Crow Indians in Montana. In the 1970's this ministry with Native Americans was extended to ministry with the Northern Cheyenne Indians, and in the 1990's with the Navajo in New Mexico and Arizona. Most prominent among the Congregation's foreign missions, were: China, 1939 to 1945 (where the Sisters spent the last two years in Japanese internment); Papua New Guinea (PNG), 1960 -2011. This mission spanned both Vatican II, and the national independence of PNG and included the establishment of a native PNG religious congregation (now a diocesan community), the Franciscan Sisters of Mary.

In 1937, Mother Clarissa Dillhoff, who had led the community since 1926, took the "preposterous" step to move Marian College (formed in 1936 as a 4-year liberal arts and teacher education college) from Oldenburg to the site of the former Allison estate in Indianapolis. This venture was undertaken to provide college education for lay women, as well as for the Sisters themselves. Accredited by the Indiana State Department of

Education in 1944, Marian became the state's first Catholic co-educational college in 1954 and continues today as Marian University with strong professional programs and the addition of an osteopathic medical school in 2013.

The Second Vatican Council brought vast changes, both internal and external, to religious congregational life, possibly most visible in changes made in the traditional dress, or habit. Numbers decreased, not only from Sisters choosing to leave the congregation, but also because decreasing numbers of women chose to enter religious life.

Changes in Catholic schools (parish school closures, and the availability of willing and qualified lay teachers), and the recognition of the many needs for faith-filled service in church and society led many Sisters to assume new ministries. They adopted new roles in the Church (e.g. pastoral ministers, directors of religious education, and Pastoral Life Coordinators), and in society (e.g., social work and health care).

Today the Sisters of St. Francis continue to sponsor Marian University and Oldenburg Academy (formerly Immaculate Conception Academy, renamed after it had become a co-ed day school in 2000). In addition they support the ministries of Michaela Farm, Oldenburg Franciscan Center, and two Houses of Discernment and Spirituality: Prayer Lodge (Montana, Native American), and Nia Kuumba (St. Louis, MO, African-American).

Throughout 165 years, in the spirit of the young Mother Theresa Hackelmeier, these Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, have continued to venture courageously from Oldenburg to carry out the vital mission of living and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

