



THE SEED

Reflections on the Life of Sister Maria Aloysia Wolbring

Sister Maria Aloysia Wolbring is regarded as foundress of the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame. She initiated the series of events that brought the congregation into being, made key decisions (collaborating with others) that set its direction, and later helped establish it in the United States.

Yet a curious thing about Sister Maria Aloysia's story is that there seems at first sight to be so little story. She didn't talk about her role in the congregation's founding. Only a handful of her letters are extant. Most of what we know about her comes from memories of sisters who had met her or lived with her. Yet when all the puzzle pieces are put together, a clear picture does emerge.

Sister Maria Aloysia was for the congregation not so much the gardener as the seed. It is from the buried seed that a plant takes root and begins to grow. Though hidden from view, the seed has already present within it what the growing plant will become. Sister Maria Aloysia was never a major superior. But by her life choices she set the pattern for the congregation's spirit of complete centeredness in a loving and provident God, whose caring love is in turn extended to others.

Sister Maria Aloysia put herself into the hands of the dear God and, on both sides of the ocean, did whatever needed to be done. So sometimes she was a local superior, sometimes not. She taught school, catechized, took care of old people, cooked, cleaned house, washed clothes, played the organ in church, fostered vocations, managed a farm, struggled with American weather and with English, served as advisor to the Superior General, helped the sisters starting new affiliations, and most of all, prayed.

At the Start

Sister Maria Aloysia was born Hilligonde Wolbring on January 9, 1828, in Rotterdam, Holland, the daughter of Otto Arnold Wolbring, a master smith from the farming community of Stenern, Westphalia, and his Dutch-born wife, Catherine Möring. An orphan by the age of seven, Hilligonde was brought by her great-uncle and guardian, Gerhard Johann Wolbring, to live with her father's relatives in Stenern.

So that Hilligonde could attend school, arrangements were made for her to board with the teacher Hermann Hüsener and his wife in nearby Bocholt. Mr. Hüsener, who became a trusted friend and advisor, and all her teachers from elementary through normal school had been educated in the tradition of Bernard Overberg. Thus Hilligonde received not only a thorough general education shaped by Overberg's pedagogy, but also a spiritual orientation toward a loving and provident God shaped by Overberg's catechesis.

A Teacher and More

After seven years of elementary school, Hilligonde spent two years as a housekeeping apprentice at a local estate in Stenern. Having decided to dedicate her life to teaching, she began at the age of seventeen to study for the entrance examination to the Royal Teacher Training College in Münster. Admitted in September 1846, she passed the teaching examination *cum laude* in August 1848. By autumn she had assumed a position as assistant teacher in the younger girls' class at St. Lambert parish, Coesfeld.

During the harsh winter of 1848-1849, Hilligonde took a decisive step beyond teaching. She began to care for a child in her class whose father was not able to look after her. Having long since wanted to use her inheritance help poor children, Hilligonde decided to provide a home for this little girl and for others who were experiencing neglect during those years of poverty and unemployment. When she and Elisabeth Kühling, her friend and fellow teacher who wanted to help, confided their plans to Rev. Theodor Elting, the parish curate, he was supportive.

A Decision for a Lifetime

The young priest also suggested that they give their work permanence by entering a religious congregation whose goals were consistent with their own. After prayer and discernment, Hilligonde and Elisabeth accepted this proposal. While continuing to teach, they began in October 1849 to care for seven poor and neglected children in a rented house. In April 1850 they were able to move with their charges into St. Annathal, a large, one-time convent purchased with funds raised by Father Elting. In the meantime the curate, acting on behalf of Münster's Bishop Johann Georg Müller and in consultation with Hilligonde, had begun negotiations for the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort, Holland, to establish a foundation and novitiate of their congregation in Coesfeld.

Three Dutch sisters arrived on June 3, 1850, bringing with them a Rule and a religious spirit originally from Julie Billiart, foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur. Finding this Rule and spirit in harmony with their own goals and with their formation as Overberg teachers, Hilligonde, as Sister Maria Aloysia, and Elisabeth, as Sister Maria Ignatia, began their novitiate on October 1, 1850. They made perpetual vows as Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort on October 4, 1852.

Her salary being needed for the support of the community, Sister Maria Aloysia continued to teach at St. Lambert's throughout her novitiate and up until November 1853. At that time she was sent with two other sisters to open the first affiliation outside Westphalia, at Aldekerk in the Rhineland. There she simply taught school at first, and so well that new students kept coming. Later she served also as local superior of the sisters and as caregiver for a few elderly or handicapped people who lived in the parish poorhouse, as did the sisters.

More Choices and Beginnings

Stationed far from Coesfeld, Sister Maria Aloysia seems not to have been directly involved in the differences of view between Mère Marie Joseph, Superior General of the Amersfoort congregation, and Father Elting, whom Bishop Müller in 1852 had named director of the Coesfeld foundation. However in June 1855, she was called to Coesfeld to take part personally in the community meetings that reluctantly accepted a proposal by church authorities that the German foundation become independent of Amersfoort. Sister Maria Aloysia was one of the eleven German professed sisters who chose to remain with the new Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame.

From 1859 to 1874, Sister Maria Aloysia served in Uedem, also in the Rhineland, where she was much loved as teacher of the older girls. The community at the “bird basket,” as their little house was called, was known for the beautiful spirit she created among the sisters through her service as local superior. Occasionally the sisters from neighboring affiliations gathered in Uedem to discuss school problems with her, sharing thoughts and ideas and catching up on trends in education.

When Bismarck's government began to force teaching religious from the parish-based public elementary schools, Sister Maria Aloysia accompanied Mother Maria Chrysostoma Heck and the first seven sisters to their new field of activity among German immigrants in St. Peter parish, Cleveland, Ohio. When it became obvious shortly after their arrival on July 6, 1874 that more sisters were needed, she offered to remain in the United States. That decision shaped the rest of her life.

In America

Sister Maria Aloysia taught at St. Peter's, at least until more sisters arrived in September, and also served as local superior there until the spring of 1878, when the congregation's motherhouse was established in Cleveland. For the next two years, the records are unclear regarding her whereabouts. There is some indication that Sister Maria Aloysia served as an advisor to Mother Maria Chrysostoma and helped sisters to get started in new schools and affiliations, including St. Mary, Toledo during 1879. Probably by the autumn of 1880, she was in charge of the local community at St. John the Evangelist parish in Delphos, in northwestern Ohio, where the sisters taught school and cared for a small group of elderly people.

By July 1886 Sister Maria Aloysia was living at Mt. St. Mary's Institute on the outskirts of Cleveland, a home for girls whose parents were not able to care for them or to provide for their education. Records show that the following spring she became local superior there. She had come full circle in her religious life, doing again the work she had started with and loved best, dependent still on God's loving and provident care. As she wrote to her cousin in Germany, “we accept the little ones so much more lovingly the poorer and more abandoned they are.”

Sister Maria Aloysia comes across as one who really cared about the sisters, the children, her family, and the poor. It was she who arranged that the sisters teaching at St. Stephen's on Cleveland's West Side would finally get their own house after going back and forth from St. Peter's by horse car for most of the first year. And there was still more to her. A sister who had worked with Sister Maria Aloysia at Mt. St. Mary's recalled learning much from her: the genuine religious life, the spirit of prayer, the inner union with God, the offering of self for others.

Some memories of Sister Maria Aloysia are like snapshots of a moment in time, as when she invited a little girl, shivering in a cold church, to sit beside her on the organ bench to keep warm. Or the story Sister Mary Adrian (d. 1955) loved to tell about how as a vivacious eleven-year-old at Mt. St. Mary's, she would, when she found herself in trouble, run to Sister Maria Aloysia and get a hug that helped make things better.

It was at Mt. St. Mary's that Sister Maria Aloysia, aged sixty-one, died of consumption on May 6, 1889. Mother Maria Chrysostoma wrote then to the sisters, “Let us pay the debt of thanks we owe her by walking in her footsteps . . . placing ourselves and all we have at God's disposal.” Like a hidden seed still, Sister Maria Aloysia lies buried in the common plot of the Sisters of Notre Dame in St. Joseph Cemetery.

