



## A Bit About BERNARD OVERBERG

*Although he died more than a year before Hilligonde Wolbring was born, Bernard Overberg's spiritually formative catechesis and his pedagogical principles were major shaping influences on the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame. From the standpoint of the Diocese of Münster, the religious institute founded in Coesfeld in 1850 was a congregation "in the spirit of the teachers educated by Overberg."*

### **Beginnings**

Bernard Overberg was born on May 1, 1754, in the village of Höckel, Diocese of Osnabrück, in the present German state of Lower Saxony. He was the fourth child and second son of farmer and peddler Eilard Bernard Overberg and his wife, Maria Gertrud Kerck. According to early accounts of his life, the future "teacher of teachers" started out developmentally handicapped, unable to walk until he was five years old, learning his ABCs only with great difficulty.

Around the age of nine, a remarkable turnaround occurred which is variously ascribed to the motivation created by his desire to be a priest or by the new teacher's threat of punishment, or to the special gift of God. Whatever the cause or combination of causes, the young Overberg not only experienced a breakthrough in his own mental development but was soon able to help other children. In view of his future life work, it is significant that in the beginning he had to struggle to learn and experienced the negative effects of incredibly poor teaching.

At fifteen, Bernard began the study of Latin with the Franciscan associate pastor at the parish church of Voltlage. A year later he entered the gymnasium of the Franciscan Fathers at Rheine, in the neighboring diocese of Münster. With his limited educational background, Bernard began his secondary schooling near the bottom of his class, but by the end of the first year had worked his way to the top. Upon completion of his gymnasium studies, Bernard was invited by the Father Guardian to enter the Franciscan community in Rheine. But Bernard believed his vocation to be to the diocesan priesthood, and so in the fall of 1774 began his philosophical and theological studies in Münster.

### **Vocation**

Once, when Bernard was home during vacation, some neighbors asked his help for their teenaged children who had not yet been admitted to Holy Communion because they could not learn the catechism. Bernard found the usual method unworkable because these young people just could not memorize questions and answers. So he began telling stories from the Bible and talking about things from everyday life and from nature. In a conversational way, he drew out the meaning in these and related it to the catechism. The young people brightened up, listened, caught on, and could easily answer his questions. The approach discovered in this way became a key element in Overberg's catechetical method.

Ordained on December 20, 1779, Father Overberg completed his last year of theology with distinction and in the fall of 1780 began his first priestly assignment in the parish of Everswinkel, southeast of Münster. The pastor having agreed to his request to be given complete charge of the religious instruction of children, the young curate soon became widely known as a remarkable catechist. As such, he came to the attention of Franz von Fürstenberg who, as the person chiefly responsible for the government of both the diocese and the principality of Münster, wanted to begin work on the reform of elementary education just as he had done at the secondary and university levels. Once he had heard Father Overberg for himself, von Fürstenberg put the young priest in charge of training the principality's elementary school teachers.

### **Teacher of Teachers**

On March 1, 1783, Overberg began the work that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He started by reading everything possible on education and by visiting the schools to see for himself the condition of the buildings and the quality of the teaching, both of which were often deplorable. To train and to establish standards for the teachers, Overberg instituted an annual "normal course" which lasted from August 21 to the beginning of November. Teachers who passed the final examination were certified to teach and received an increment in pay. In that limited amount of time, all Overberg could do was lay a foundation upon which the teachers would have to build, something they often did by keeping in contact with him and even repeating the course after a few years. The fact that women as well as men attended his normal course was so much a departure from traditional ways, that Overberg is said to have created the profession of female lay teacher.

In 1793, Overberg published his lecture notes for the normal course under the title *Anweisung zum zweckmässigen Schulunterricht* (*Directives for Purposeful School-teaching*), the book for which he is principally known. Later he wrote and published a Bible history, including both Old and New Testaments (1799), catechisms for younger children and for older students (1804), a religion handbook to accompany the catechisms (1804), and more. In order to maintain his link with the classroom and with students, Overberg taught reading, writing, mathematics, and religion at the convent school of St. Peter Fourier's Augustinian Canonesses of the Congregation of Our Lady, going there three times a week from 1784 until 1811, when Napoleon's secularization forced the sisters to leave.

### **Vision**

In his pedagogical and catechetical work, Overberg expressed his conviction that God has given human beings two eyes, faith and reason, and both must be used. The common school education, of which catechesis was an integral part, was to help young people grow into adults who possessed the human understanding, knowledge, and competencies necessary for a full and complete life; who could think and communicate clearly and assume responsibility for themselves and for others; who were happy, open to union with a loving, provident God encountered in creation, in simple prayer, in Scripture and the sacraments, in the events of life; who made moral choices out of a genuine, faithful love for God and for the neighbor - every human being without exception.

The way Overberg saw God and the human person worked itself out not only in his pedagogical and catechetical ministry, but also in the other areas of activity in which he was engaged over the years. He was sought out by both rich and poor as a confessor and spiritual director. It was in this capacity that he was associated with Princess Amalia Gallitzin, first helping her return to the Catholic Church and then becoming her advisor, confessor, spiritual director and friend from 1789 until her death in 1806. Overberg, with his capacity for going to the heart of the matter and expressing profound ideas in a simple way, became a key member of the “Münster circle” of Catholic intellectuals which gathered around Amalia and von Fürstenberg and which stimulated a renewal in Catholic life and thought. When Overberg became rector of the diocesan seminary in 1809 he assumed a responsibility for the spiritual formation of diocesan priests that lasted for seventeen years.

Overberg’s teaching was always more than just words. What he taught about God’s love, he lived. His genuine love for everyone, his kindness, warmth, and simplicity, made the most varied kinds of people feel at ease with him. What Overberg taught about a person’s obligation in justice to share with those in need and to help them become able to provide for themselves, he lived. He readily parted with his own things to relieve the needs of the poor and spent 43 years developing a system of elementary education that would enable the common people to have a life in keeping with their human dignity.

### **Legacy**

Bernard Overberg died on November 9, 1826, at the very time that the last students to go through his annual normal course were taking their certification examination. Some of his former students had just brought to reality his long-held dream of establishing a regular two-year “seminary” for male teachers. In 1832 it became possible to do the same for female teachers. In 1852 the Sisters of Notre Dame, in cooperation with the Diocese of Münster, opened a similar teacher training institute in Coesfeld for their own members. Thus through priests and lay teachers, through the common schools, through the teacher training “seminaries,” and through a deep, spiritually formative catechesis, Overberg’s influence continued and so entered into the life and ministry of the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame. The Overberg tradition became a gift entrusted to them for the benefit of people all over the world.

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