

The Seasons of Our Life

A Brief History of the Sisters of Notre Dame

The Sisters of Notre Dame is a Roman Catholic congregation of religious women whose principal apostolic work is Christian education in its various aspects. The congregation began in Coesfeld, Westphalia, Germany at a time of great economic and social distress. During the winter of 1848-49, Hilligonde Wolbring, a twenty-one-year-old elementary school teacher in St. Lambert's Parish, began to care for a child in her class whose father was unable to look after her. Deciding to use her inheritance to provide a home for such children, Hilligonde told her friend and fellow teacher Elisabeth Kühling about the plan. Lisette, as she was known, wanted to help. The two teachers then consulted Rev. Theodor Elting, the parish curate. So began the congregation's **Spring**.



Accepting Father Elting's suggestion that they give continuity to their work by becoming religious sisters, Hilligonde and Elisabeth took a major step in that direction in October 1849, when, in addition to teaching, they began to care for seven poor, neglected children in a rented house.

Meanwhile, authorized by the Bishop of Münster, Johann Georg Müller, Father Elting began negotiations with the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort, The Netherlands, about their establishing a foundation and novitiate in Coesfeld. On June 3, 1850, three Dutch sisters arrived at St. Annathal, the old convent into which the two candidates and their charges had recently moved. On October 1, Hilligonde, as Sister Maria Aloysia, and Elisabeth, as Sister Maria Ignatia, began their novitiate. From this event the Coesfeld congregation dates its beginning.

The Amersfoort Sisters brought with them the Rule and religious spirit of St. Julie Billiart, foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur, Belgium. For their part, the Coesfeld novices had been formed since childhood in the spirituality integral to Bernard Overberg's catechesis. This spirituality, as also the charism of Sister Maria Aloysia, was focused on the loving God's provident care. They blended well with the charism of St. Julie, a deep experience of God's goodness that must be shared. Likewise the social concern characteristic of the Münster diocese and of the first Coesfeld sisters was compatible with St. Julie's commitment to the education of poor children.

From the beginning, however, there were problems at the practical level in harmonizing the interests of the Münster diocese with those of a congregation whose general government was outside the diocese. Serious differences of view developed between Father Elting, whom Bishop Müller appointed Director of the Coesfeld community, and Mère Marie Joseph, Superior General of the Amersfoort congregation. On the advice of ecclesiastical authorities in Holland and Germany, the Amersfoort and Coesfeld communities reluctantly agreed to a separation in June 1855, making the Coesfeld foundation an independent congregation with eleven professed sisters, twenty-two novices, a motherhouse, and two affiliations.

Subsequently the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame developed a flourishing educational ministry extending from kindergarten to teacher education, shaped by the religious and pedagogical principles of Bernard Overberg, who from 1783 to 1826 had been a leader in the spiritual and educational renewal of the Münster diocese. Their work extended also to the care of neglected children and of aged infirm people. "Kulturkampf" laws passed by the Bismarck government between 1872 and 1875 included the removal of religious sisters from teaching positions in the public elementary schools and the expulsion of teaching congregations from Prussia.

This situation led the congregation to seek a new field of labor in the United States. So began a time of steady growth, of **Summer**.



Mother Maria Chrysostoma Heck, second superior general, elicited from Bishop Richard Gilmour an invitation to the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, where the sisters would teach primarily in the German parishes. She herself accompanied to Cleveland the first group of eight sisters, including foundress Sister Maria Aloysia Wolbring. They arrived on July 6, 1874, welcomed by Rev. Francis Westerholt of St. Peter Parish. At the urgent request of Bishop August Többe, two sisters were sent to Covington, Kentucky, in August to teach in Mother of God Parish there.

By 1877, when the Coesfeld motherhouse was closed by order of the Prussian government, approximately 200 Sisters of Notre Dame had come to the United States and were teaching the children of immigrants across northern Ohio, in the Covington-Cincinnati area and as far west as Burlington, Iowa. With the arrival in 1875 of Sister Maria Modesta Többe, Bishop Többe's sister, as superior of the sisters in the United States, Covington became the provisional center of the congregation until a new motherhouse was established in Cleveland in 1878.

By 1888, the ending of the Kulturkampf made it possible to reestablish the motherhouse in Germany, this time in the Rhineland village of Mülhausen. The Holy See granted final approbation to the Constitutions in 1900, making the congregation an institute of pontifical right. Later revisions were approved in 1935, 1981, 1987, 1992, 1998, and 2004.

In the United States, the congregation grew gradually through the entrance of American young women and, until the late 1930s, through volunteer sisters coming from Germany. In 1924, the American houses, up to that time governed from Cleveland, were organized by permission of the Holy See into the provinces of Cleveland, Covington, and Toledo. In the same year, sisters from Cleveland started working in the Watts area of Los Angeles, California, beginning a development which led in 1961 to the establishment of a fourth province.

By the 1880s the sisters had begun to teach in ethnic parishes other than German, especially in Cleveland, and later in parishes without ethnic identification. In later years, some of these parish elementary schools added a two-year commercial course and eventually a full four-year high school program.

Community-owned academies were established in Covington (1876), Cleveland (1877), Toledo (1904), Los Angeles (1946), and Middleburg, Virginia (1965). The educational program in these schools, particularly in the earlier years, might include both elementary and secondary departments, a two-year commercial course, and special instruction in music, needlework, and art. Whereas the elementary departments were coeducational almost from the beginning, coeducation in community-owned secondary schools is a more recent development.

The congregation also established other private elementary and secondary schools and one institution of higher education. Notre Dame College of Ohio was founded in 1922 in Cleveland and, in addition to its liberal arts orientation, has developed a strong tradition of professional preparation for women, especially in education, business, and science.

The sisters also undertook domestic work in seminaries and assumed the care of orphans and neglected children, of elderly people, and of the sick, ministries that have their most continuous history in the Covington province.

By the 1960s, one could see in the sisters' work a kind of harvest growing out of almost one hundred years spent trying to bring into people's lives the goodness and caring love of God. This was our **Autumn**.



While maintaining its initial educational commitments, the congregation was extending its ministry into such areas of activity as diocesan high schools and colleges, schools for learning disabled or developmentally handicapped children, early childhood programs, parish-based catechesis and pastoral work, adult literacy programs, publishing, and service in diocesan offices. Special attention was being paid to maintaining quality schools in inner-city areas and to addressing the needs of the new populations that had moved into old ethnic neighborhoods.

Since the 1920s, the congregation had already been extending its activity beyond the familiar centers of Catholic, European-descended population in the United States. Besides some involvement in the "home missions," especially in the Covington province, the sisters had also taken on foreign missionary work. The Cleveland province had sent its first sisters to India in 1949. Then in 1961, the Toledo province began its mission in the western highlands of Papua New Guinea. And despite the declining numbers of available sisters in recent years, the Covington and California provinces undertook a joint mission in Uganda in 1995.

The reference to "declining numbers" alludes to the current situation of the congregation in Europe and the United States: aging membership, falling off of new vocations, necessity of withdrawal from long-standing places of ministry, a diminishment, as when Autumn turns to **Winter**. Yet even in winter, the buds of the new spring are visible on the barren branches. In 2007, for example, the American provinces established the S.N.D. National Education Office, bringing the congregation's educational vision into sharper focus through an inter-province collaboration involving both the sisters and those who minister with them in the schools. And in South America, Asia, and Africa the 158-year-old congregation continues to be young in age and growing in numbers.



Presently there are approximately 750 sisters in the four United States provinces: Chardon (Cleveland), Ohio; Toledo, Ohio; Covington, Kentucky; Thousand Oaks, California. Though concentrated in Ohio, Kentucky, and California, the sisters are working also in Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Nicaragua, Tanzania, the Philippines, and Uganda. Approximately 1,500 other members of the congregation are active in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Brazil, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, South Korea, Vietnam, and China. Their motherhouse is now in Rome, the long-planned move from Germany having been finally carried out in 1947. Sustained by their trust in the goodness and the caring, provident love of God, the Sisters of Notre Dame are looking forward to their second **Spring**.

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