

## **At Home in the Heart of God**

**by: Sr. Mary Teresita Richards, SND**

Sr. Maria Aloysia went home to God on May 6, 1889. Thus, this year marks the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death. It seems appropriate to reflect on the various places that Sister called “home” throughout her life.

Sr. Maria Aloysia had the experience of continual change of residence as an orphaned child. Her first home was Rotterdam, Holland. Her parent’s love filled their home at House Schielands Hoogen Zeedijk, Viertel U, number 3. By the age of seven her parents and her little brother were called home to eternity. Hilligonde continued to live in the same house but now with a step-father Mr. von Rijbreck, who seemed to like her inheritance funds far more than her. Then her Wolbring relatives intervened and took her “home” to Germany.

Legally her Great Uncle Gert Jan Wolbring, not Mr. von Rijbreck, was her guardian. This had been established upon her parent’s wishes. A parish priest who visited the von Rijbroeck home in the months after Hilligonde’s mother’s death saw the marked difference in the behavior of the seven-year-old girl and knew it was time to contact her family in Germany.

A long journey was made by Uncle Gert Jan from Stenern, Germany to the Hilligonde’s home in Rotterdam but he was not met with a warm welcome by the von Rijbrecks. Instead he had to go before the city magistrates to prove that he was indeed the official guardian. With the approval of the authorities, Hilligonde left Holland in his company and moved to Germany.

In time Uncle Gert Jan became a dearly treasured person in Hilligonde’s life and she greatly appreciated the trouble he had gone to many times on her behalf. However, his home was never her residence. He lived with three other older bachelor uncles and this didn’t seem like a place to raise a little girl, so he had arranged for Hilligonde to live with her father’s brother, Bernard, and wife Catherina. They regularly took in foster children.

Hilligonde’s new home was on a farm in Stenern, something she initially found repulsive, and there she was just one among many children, a challenge for an only child. The months of springtime and summer of 1835 were challenging ones as she learned the give and take of family life. In time she embraced the sense of home she experienced in the love of her aunt and uncle and extended Wolbring family. Here she could return on holidays for many years as well as the home of her father’s youngest sister, Christina Terroerde in Dingden. We know that Hilligonde remained connected to many of her relatives throughout her life by writing to them even from America.

In October 1835 the new school year began. A challenge presented itself. There was no longer a school in the village of Stenern. The small country schools had been consolidated into the larger school in the town of Bocholt. Attendance would necessitate a long walk each day. This would be difficult for Hilligonde who did not yet have the same physical stamina as her cousins who were accustomed to walking long distances. This could be resolved if she lived in town. It would also provide her with the opportunity for enrichment classes that were offered after the normal school day.

Uncle Gert Jan arranged for Hilligonde to reside with Mr. Hermann Hüsener and his wife Theresia in their home on Waisenhausstrasse in Bocholt. Hermann and Theresia had no children but they gladly helped to raise Hilligonde as their own daughter. Providentially this orphan's playmates were the orphans that lived across the street in a repurposed former convent.

The Hüsener home quickly became more than a residence for Hilligonde. Mr. Hüsener was perhaps the inspiration for Hilligonde's desire to become a teacher a few years later. He had always taken an active role in supporting her education and her character development. For decades she felt at home coming to Mr. Hüsener for his wise advice and formative guidance even into her adult life.

After her initial years of education were finished, Hilligonde found herself at home on the Tangerding Estate in the region where her relatives lived. Here she learned the art of being the hostess of a large home with all the needed housekeeping skills. Of all the tasks she was to take on the one she most felt at home with was the care and formation of the children on this large estate. When Hilligonde's journey took her next to the Royal Teacher Training College in Münster, these children insisted that Hilligonde come to visit with them during her holiday, so at home did they feel in her presence.

Hilligonde's two years of preparation for her role as an educator were treasured ones. She felt at home among her classmates, as we can tell from stories which demonstrate her ease in relating with them. She also fully embraced the school's mission passed on from its founders, students of Fr. Bernard Overberg, and the sacrifices entailed in the life of a Catholic educator, the most significant being that women teachers were not permitted to be married.

As a young teenager she had pictured her home as being in a mission country eagerly introducing the love of Christ to those who had not yet heard the good news, a dream, however, that was redirected. As a college student she could envision her home among orphans in the city of Berlin improving the quality of life for children caught in sweat shop labor. This dream too was redirected by the Holy Spirit. Hilligonde with her missionary heart was sent to the town of Coesfeld which was experiencing a time of economic depression. Here she found a home among her students, the friendship of Elisabeth Kühling, and the support of persons such as Fr. Kettelhak, the priest who managed her inheritance funds, and Fr. Elting who regularly visited her classroom for catechism classes, both serving in the parish of St. Lambert.

Hilligonde's heart broke at the dire situation of some of her students. One child especially captured her attention, Maria Uphus. Technically Maria had a home, but her mother had recently died. The medical costs of caring for her had exhausted the family's funds. Her father was a day laborer often away from the home searching for work. Her home had become an empty house with little fuel or food and no one to wrap her in their love. This was the first child Hilligonde began to care for. In time she learned that there were many other children like Maria. Hilligonde's residences had shifted many times over her twenty-one years of life, but she had always had a home in the love of persons who cared for her. It was the time to repay the favor.

Joined by her friend and fellow teacher Elisabeth, Hilligonde began to make plans to care for more children like Maria. At Fr. Elting's proposal, they also began a discernment process to see if God were calling them to religious life. Gradually they came to the awareness that God's call to vowed life was to be intertwined with their outreach to God's homeless children. With Fr. Elting's help, they began by making a home for several street children in a little rented house on Süring Street in Coesfeld. Six months later they moved to the south end of town, to the oldest portion of an ancient monastery that we know as St. Annathal.

This latter dwelling was in sorry state when Hilligonde, Elisabeth and the children first moved in. Benefactors were raising pledges to cover the purchase price of these building. For two additional years the former owner remained in residence in the nicest portion of the building, perhaps anxious that the pledges might not turn into funds. This building had served many purposes over the centuries and practically every room in the original part of the building where they lived needed renovation or major decluttering and cleaning. But the love that filled these drafty halls and the giggles of children soon transformed it from a former monastery/turned into castle/retrofitted into a paper mill/transformed into a home for children in need and a future convent. For in the meantime, negotiations had been going on between the Diocese of Münster and the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort to bring that community to Coesfeld.

Three Amersfoort Sisters arrived from Holland on June 3, 1850, the actual entrance date of Hilligonde and Elisabeth, to help them begin their novitiate. On this date St. Annathal was transformed into a convent home. The two young teachers still taught at St. Lambert's school by day and mothered children by night, but they were also in formation as postulants and later as novices. It was a busy novitiate but one that helped them realize that they felt at home in the religious life as Sisters of Notre Dame, belonging completely to the dear God, Soli Deo.

The year after Sr. Maria Aloysia's profession of vows she was asked to make the sacrifice of leaving her beloved orphans and to begin one of the first daughter houses at a distance from Coesfeld. Here in Aldekerk, Germany, Sister Maria Aloysia taught a large class of younger girls and created a home with Sr. Maria Anna and Sr. Marie Geneviève, an Amersfoort Sister, for the elderly poor who lived with them. This former monastery now served as a "poor house" for the destitute at a time when there was no Social Security or Medicaid. There is evidence of the loving support these Sisters gave to each other that energized them for their ministries and helped them weather the storms that arose. The affirmation that Sr. Maria Aloysia gave to Sr. Maria Anna would continue to spill over into her supportive presence when Sr. Maria Anna was chosen for congregational leadership.

Six years later Sr. Maria Aloysia was asked to take up residence in Uedem, Germany. She and two younger sisters lived in a house so small that it was nicknamed "the bird's nest" or "bird cage," depending upon the translation. However, the only thing small about it was its square footage. This was a place of great love and support. Sr. Maria Aloysia's co-Sisters were new to religious life and to the classroom. They felt at home in Sr. Maria Aloysia supportive presence. Partnering with Sr. Maria Ignatia, the current novice directress, Sr. Maria Aloysia gathered biweekly with all newer Sisters in her region and assisted them in their integration of the living

of religious life and their life of ministry. She also gave them concrete suggestions on how to thrive while teaching large classes of girls.

In the spring of 1874 everything began to shift in the life of Sister and the community. A political repression spurred on by Otto von Bismarck necessitated that all Sisters living in Prussia prepare themselves to be uprooted. They were no longer welcome to live in their homeland and remain teaching as religious. They would have to sacrifice religious life in order to remain. Exile was immanent for more than 200 Sisters. The superior general wrote a letter to the Sisters telling them that a new mission field was opening for them in the United States. She framed her letter in the context of the unfolding ever-new call of God, versus a disaster that would end everything they had worked for thus far. The Sisters took her rhetorical question of “Are you ready? Are you willing to go?” as an actual letter of appeal and some wrote to the superior offering to serve in the new world.

Perhaps Sr. Maria Aloysia was one of those who wrote a letter expressing her willingness. Regardless, we know that she offered to assist Mother Maria Chrysostoma in any way she could. Her offer was accepted and she was invited to join the first group going to the USA. She helped with the details of setting up a new mission and assisting in the exploration for new ministry possibilities for future groups of exiles. After sixteen days on the high seas and being tossed about by hurricane winds, Sr. Maria Aloysia left her bunk weakened by seasickness and very grateful to be on solid ground.

One day later she and her companions boarded a train for a eighteen hour ride to the Cleveland depot followed by half hour ride by carriage to the little frame house at 15 Huntington Street close to St. Peter’s Church and School in Cleveland. Sister gladly assisted in the process of transforming it into a proper Notre Dame home.

In a matter of a few weeks the seven Sisters who had come in this first band of SNDs was committed to serve in three locations and in two dioceses. This left them short one teacher for the start of the new school year. What should they do? Mother Maria Chrysostoma and Sr. Maria Aloysia were scheduled to return back to Germany in a short while. There was no quick way to notify the Sisters back in Europe that additional Sisters were needed and there was no expeditious means of transportation. So, Sr. Maria Aloysia offered to remain in Cleveland and to fill in as a teacher until more Sisters could arrive. This meant she probably never said goodbye to her family and she never returned to her homeland.

By mid-September reinforcements had come and Sr. Maria Aloysia could assist the three groups of SNDs now serving in the USA. By the following spring a continuous stream of exiled Sisters began to arrive and each group’s first destination was St. Peter’s Convent in Cleveland. What the Sisters noticed was how Sr. Maria Aloysia made them feel at home. Her hospitality and encouragement were tangibly real. She had a way of helping her Sisters get past the overwhelming feelings of homesickness and to see this exile as an opportunity to be missionaries. For Sr. Maria Aloysia this experience was the fulfillment of a life-long desire to be a missionary since the USA was considered a mission territory into the 1920s.

Group after group of exiled Sisters arrived with news of how the repression was affecting the congregation and the country. Each group's update seemed sadder than the last. The last arrivals recounted how they had participated in the final Mass at the chapel at St. Annathal and had extinguished the sanctuary lamp. There were no longer Sisters of Notre Dame on Prussian soil. The motherhouse was empty. After twenty-seven years the original Notre Dame home was gone.

Even in the face of such sad news, Sr. Maria Aloysia was able to encourage others because of the endless source of strength that she found in prayer. This was not the first crisis she had weathered since she joined the congregation. Each crisis had found her on her knees before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Sisters who had lived with Sr. Maria Aloysia wrote that she seemed most at home when she was before the tabernacle. This was the source of her ability to be a home wherever she was. *Soli Deo* wasn't a motto for her, it was her lived reality. The heart of God was her home and her beloved had sustained her through every crisis she had personally endured and in the storms that battered her beloved Notre Dame.

Sr. Maria Aloysia's supportive presence continued to be felt by the Sisters in Cleveland from 1874-1879, then by her Sisters in Toledo in 1879, in Delphos from 1880-1886, and at Mt. St. Mary's from 1886-1889.

Of all the ministry assignments Sister had in her thirty-nine years of religious life, the one dearest to her heart was that of caring for orphans. In 1886 Sr. Maria Aloysia was recuperating from an illness at Mt. St. Mary's. When Mother Maria Chrysostoma saw that her health had returned she asked Sister if she would consider being the manager of St. Mary's. This included coordinating the care of the orphans, overseeing the new Sister teachers who taught these children, the care of the Sisters who were sent to Mt. St. Mary's to recuperate after an illness, as well as the lay staff who assisted in these ministries and the farm hands. When tears of joy streamed down Sister's face she explained that ever since she had left Coesfeld in 1853 she had longed to be with orphans again. She had always hesitated to bring it up to her superiors because she felt that it would violate of the spirit of the vow of obedience, but now she was exceedingly happy and grateful that God had at long last fulfilled this ardent wish of hers. Eagerly she accepted this mission. So the first four years of her religious life in Notre Dame and in the last three years of her life Sr. Maria Aloysia had the joy of being surrounded by fellow orphans.

At Mt. St. Mary's the children found more than a shelter and a sense of structure. They found in the caring hearts of the Sisters of Notre Dame a sense of home. We know that this was especially true of Sr. Maria Aloysia by how the children responded to her. She couldn't go walking outside without being surrounded by them. They took her hand and held on to the rosary that hung at her side. Sister had endeared herself as she interacted with them on her visits and her occasional catechism lesson. She made sure the food prepared for them was sufficient and good. She checked on them at night in their dorms to make sure they were warm enough and sleeping soundly. She planned fun outdoor activities for them. And at Christmas time she moved heaven and earth to make their Christ Child wishes come true. She ensured they had a wonderful celebration on Christmas Day and she spent a considerable portion of the day with them.

After a bout of pneumonia in the winter of 1889 Sr. Maria Aloysia's weakened body succumbed to tuberculosis. When her superior offered to move her into the infirmary in Cleveland, Sister asked if she could remain at Mt. St. Mary's among the orphans. It was here that she felt most at home. That was mutual on the children's part as was testified to upon Sister's death. On the day of Sr. Maria Aloysia's burial when her body was carried out of the house the children cried as if their hearts would break, so precious had Sr. Maria Aloysia become to them.

Now for the past 130 years Sr. Maria Aloysia's home has been in the heart of God. But indeed, this is where Sister's home had always been for the sixty-one years of her earthly life.

Today as we are experiencing many changes. These are necessary steps in our process of our coming together as one US province. Some of these are shifts in our residency and the sale of some of our beloved properties, may Sr. Maria Aloysia intercede for us, that we too may always find our true home in the heart of God. Soli Deo, and in the supportive love of our Sisters

(Stay tuned for another next significant anniversary on November 8, 2019. This will be the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Sr. Maria Ignatia Kühling. May she too intercede for us.)