



# The Apple of His Eye

## What Hilligonde Wolbring Learned and Lived

Let's time travel for a moment back to 1840 and stop in at the older girls' school in Bocholt, a textile manufacturing town close to the Dutch border. Miss Laumann, still the picture of an old-time Overberg teacher in black dress and cape and white bonnet, has just finished a lesson on the providence of God. In a conversational manner, she has led her eleven to fourteen year old girls through a consideration of the many and wonderful ways in which the dear God cares for us. Now it's time for her students to open their catechisms, read over for themselves what they have just heard, and reflect on it. Among the questions and answers is this one:

373. *What does it mean: God protects us?*

*If we hold fast to God, he will stand by us in all dangers of body and soul and preserve us as the apple of his eye. (Dt 32, 10).*

When she read those words, did Hilligonde Wolbring perhaps look back over her young life and think about how different everything had become when great-uncle Gerhard brought her, a rich and spoiled orphan, from her step-parents' home in Rotterdam to the farm of her father's brother in Westphalia? Was she already beginning to realize that this change, which had been so hard for her at first, was God's way of pulling her out of spiritual danger? That she was indeed "the apple of his eye?"



### Overberg Catechesis

The method of catechesis which Bernard Overberg used himself, and in which he trained his teachers, tried to make sure that religious truth spoke not only to the head, but also to the heart. What children were taught about God should not only put knowledge into their heads but also call their hearts to a response of love. For him the catechism (he wrote his own) was not so much a set of questions and answers for children to memorize as it was a source for them to read, to think about, to pray over, gradually come to understand. It was the songs, the little verses, the stories used in catechesis that the children should know by heart. These expressed in an attractive way the most important things to remember about God. They would come to mind even years later as a help in prayer or as a source of strength and guidance in time of crisis.

Did Overberg's method, and the way teachers he trained used it, have any lasting effect? It is clearly too late to do any scientifically controlled study about that, but an anecdotal approach is possible. One could identify a person who grew up with Overberg's catechesis, maybe even taught that way as an adult, and then ask whether that person's life showed any carry over. Someone just like that is close at hand: young Hilligonde, who became Miss Wolbring, school teacher, and then Sister Maria Aloysia, foundress of the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame.



## Her Teachers and What They Taught

Hilligonde's exposure to the Overberg catechesis probably began when she started going to school in Bocholt at the age of seven. It was not just her teacher, Miss Kösters, or the parish priest, Father Schütte, who led her to know her loving and provident God. Since Hilligonde's relatives lived too far from Bocholt to allow her to attend school every day, she boarded for seven years with the boys' teacher Hermann Hüsener and his wife, who had no children of their own. Trained as a teacher by Overberg himself, Mr. Hüsener knew how to open a child's mind and heart to seeing God's world through God's eyes, and to loving everyone in it. "Uncle Hüsener, my good foster -father," as Sister Maria Aloysia called him later, became a trusted friend and adviser with whom she corresponded even from the United States.

Hilligonde had yet more Overberg formation through teachers he had prepared: Miss Laumann in the latter years of elementary school; Miss Koch, who prepared her to take the entrance exam for the Royal Teacher Training Seminar for Women in Münster; Henrietta Buchholz, principal teacher at the Seminar who had been associated with the "Teacher of Teachers" from the time she was a child, first as student, then as colleague; her assistants Katharina Buckhorn and Magdalene Tiemann; Director Gröning, the priest who had charge of the Seminar.

If what Hilligonde learned from her teachers and from Hermann Hüsener had any carry over into the way she lived, a correspondence should be obvious between the main themes of Overberg's catechesis and the accounts we have of her life. The short verses which Overberg put into his *Religion Handbook* as a help to teachers offer a key to the major themes of his catechesis. The way of seeing and relating to God which these verses express is also remarkably like what we know of Sister Maria Aloysia. Here we can look at them together: a selection of verses given in both German and English and some glimpses of Sister Maria Aloysia's life and spirituality. The verses are grouped around the principle themes of her spirituality, themes that are distinct but interrelated.



## Centeredness in God

Wer ist es, der die ganze Welt  
Erschaffen hat, und noch erhält?

Who is it who has made the  
whole world and still keeps it in being?

Wer ist es, O mein Gott! als Du?  
Ja dir gehöret alles zu.

Who is it, O my God, if not you?  
Yes, everything belongs to you.

Gott sorget für mein wahres Glück  
In jedem Augenblick;  
Undankbar wär' es, wenn ich dessen  
Wollt' je vergessen.

God at every moment  
looks after my real happiness;  
I would be ungrateful if I were  
ever to forget him.

So kann keine Mutter lieben,  
Als der gute Gott uns liebt;  
Sollt' ich Ihn nicht wieder lieben,  
Ihn, der mich so zärtlich liebt?

No mother can love us as well  
As the good God loves us.  
Should I not love him in return,  
Who loves me so tenderly?

When Mother Maria Chrysostoma informed the sisters in Germany on May 10, 1889 that Sister Maria Aloysia had died four days earlier in Cleveland, she closed by writing, "Let us pay the debt of

thanks we owe her by walking in her footsteps. . . by placing ourselves and all that we have at God's disposal . . ." These few words tell the basic story of Sister Maria Aloysia's life. Indeed the biography of Sister Maria Aloysia, published in 1932, is entitled *Soli Deo*, God Alone. As she herself wrote to her beloved great-uncle in January, 1858: ". . . if we really endeavor to belong to the dear God alone . . . then death will not find us unprepared."

Sister Maria Aloysia's belonging to God meant always loving him and turning to him. Years later, sisters who had lived with her still remembered the way she prayed. Sister Maria Josanna recalled that ". . . intimate converse with God in prayer was a real need for Sister Maria Aloysia. . . she prayed everywhere -- in the house, on the street, in the fields, in the woods . . . when her hands were busily at work . . . She felt the presence of God everywhere; but when she entered the chapel and approached the altar, her heart seemed to become jubilantly happy . . ."



### Trust in God's Providential Care

Du sorgest, Gott, mit Freundlichkeit,  
Für alles, und zu aller Zeit.  
So sei den auch zu aller Zeit  
Mein Herz zu deinen Dienst bereit.

God, with kindness you care  
For everything, and at all times.  
Then, at all times also, may  
My heart be ready to serve you.

—

Gott! helfen kannst du immer,  
Weil du allmächtig bist;  
Darum verzag' ich nimmer,  
So gross die Not auch ist.

God, you can always help  
because you are almighty.  
Therefore I shall never lose hope  
no matter how great the need.

Sister Maria Aloysia was acutely aware of the working of God's provident love in her life. The foundational experience, at age seven, was her great-uncle's removing her from Rotterdam. At thirty she thanked him again, "you have set me on the path toward my present happiness. . . the dear God has done it, but he has used you as his instrument."

Years later, telling her family about Mt. St Mary's she wrote: "for food, clothing and so on the dear God must often provide, for we have comparatively many children who can pay nothing . . . but so far the dear God has always taken care and will certainly continue to do so." Sister Maria Aloysia loved her relatives dearly, yet reflecting on the changes brought about by a death in the family, she wrote to her cousin Hendrina: ". . . the dear God knows everything the best; what he does is well done!"



### Caring Love for Others

Glaub't fest an Gott und  
hoff't auf Ihn,  
Und liebet nichts so sehr als Ihn,  
Lieb't auch den Nächsten  
so wie euch;  
So gibt euch Gott das Himmelreich.

Believe firmly in God and  
hope in him,  
And love nothing so much as him,  
Also love your neighbor  
as yourself;  
Then God will give you the  
kingdom of heaven.

—

Denk oft:  
Gott! was ich bin, ist dein;

Think often:  
God, what I am is yours;

Sollt' ich, gleich dir,  
nicht gütig sein?

Should I not, like you, be kind?

Already as a teenager, Sister Maria Aloysia had begun looking for a way to devote her inheritance and her life to help children needing a real home and an education. She took the first concrete step around the time of her twenty-first birthday, assuming the care of a neglected little girl in her class, a decision that led to the founding of the Coesfeld Sisters of Notre Dame. Such children remained a special concern of hers until she died at the age of sixty-one. But everyone felt her love. Both students and co-sisters remembered her as caring, friendly, kind, warm, helpful, self-sacrificing, understanding -- exactly what people said about Overberg. Had she learned her lessons well?

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