

Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame



MISSIONED TO INCARNATE THE LOVE
OF
OUR GOOD AND PROVIDENT GOD

CONTRIBUTIONS MADE COURTESY OF:

Research/Project Manager	Sister Marie Emma Kim, SND
Text	Sister Mary Kristin Battles, SND
Editing	Sister Maria Elke Baumann, SND
Art	Sister Marie Teresita Kim, SND Sister Maria Ambrosa Meurer, SND Sister Suzanne Marie Phillips, SND Sister Mary Megan Dull, SND Sister Maria Canisa Preissler, SND Nancy Lee Smith, IHM Theresa Boksoon Kim
Consultants	Sister Maria Alcidia Guareschi, SND Sister Maria Julindis Melis, SND Sister Mary Shauna Bankemper, SND Sister Mary Sreeja Chittilappilly, SND
Sources	History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld, Germany Sister Maria Raphaelita Bockmann, SND Sister Maria Birgitta Morthorst, SND October 1, 2012 Letter, Sister Mary Kristin Battles, SND Bernard Overberg, Sister Mary Jessica Karlinger, SND

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Editor: Editions du Signe
1. rue Alfred Kastler - Eckbolsheim
BP 10094 - 67038 Strasbourg Cedex, France
Ph.: ++33 (0)3 88 78 91 91 - Fax: ++33 (0)3 88 78 91 99
E-mail: info@editionsdusigne.fr
www.editionsdusigne.fr

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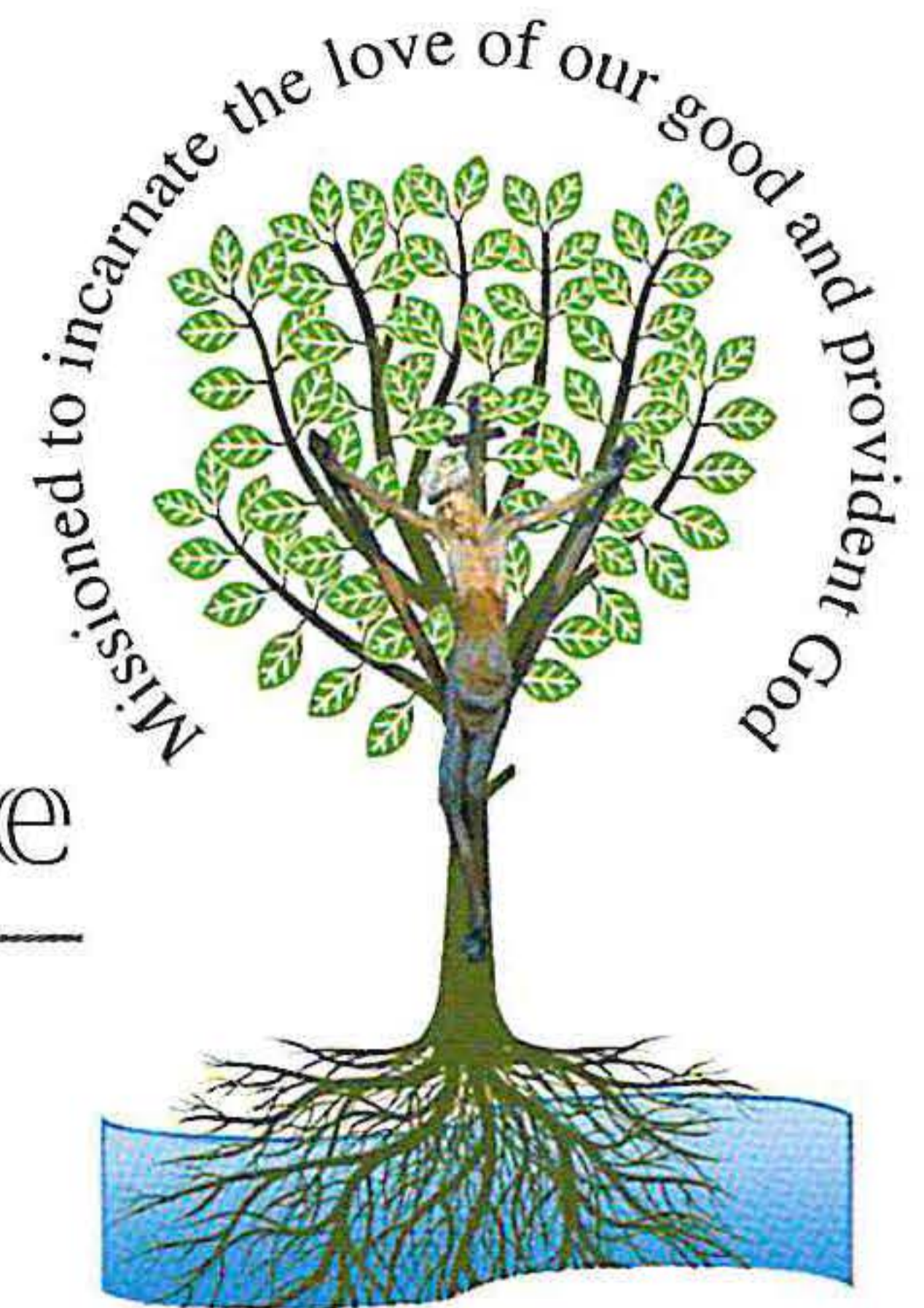
Congregation
of the Sisters
of Notre Dame



**MISSIONED TO INCARNATE THE LOVE
OF
OUR GOOD AND PROVIDENT GOD**

PRELUDE

Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame Coesfeld, Germany



As a symbol the cross has great significance in the life of St. Julie, the Spiritual Mother of the Sisters of Notre Dame and Sister Maria Aloysia and Sister Maria Ignatia the foundress and co-foundress. Julie's call to found a religious institute was confirmed when in 1793 while in Compiègne she had a vision in which she saw a number of women in a habit unknown to

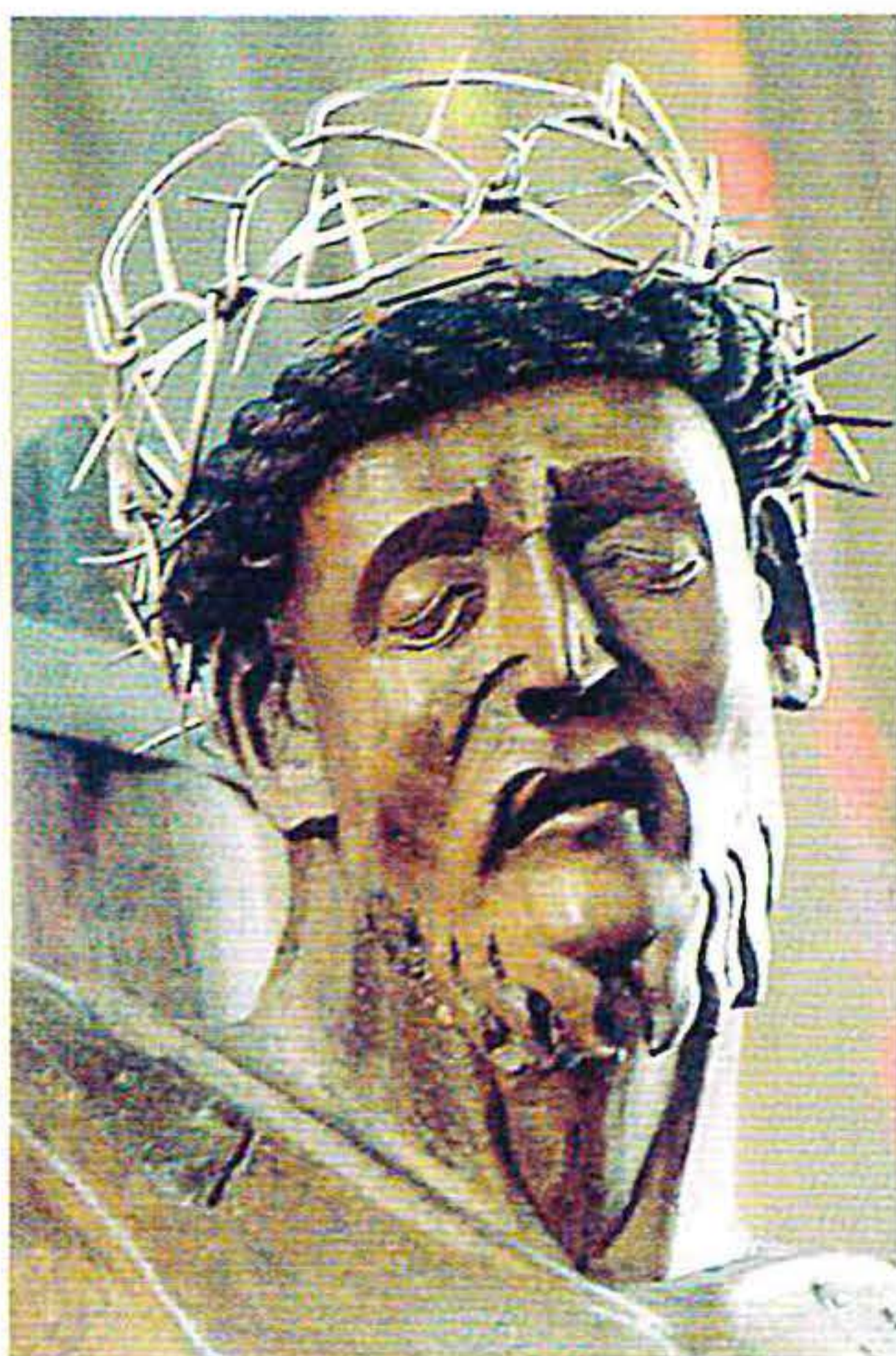


Julie Billiart

her around the crucified Savior on Calvary. She then heard a voice say to her **"Behold, the daughters that I wish to give you in an institute that will be marked by my cross."** In 1806 Julie had a second vision while gazing on the crucifix during the community singing of **"lumen ad revelationem gentium."** Julie was caught up in rapture and became interiorly aware that God desired that her Congregation should have a world-wide mission. In 1809 just before departing from Amiens Julie received her third vision of Christ carrying his cross and saying to her, **"Look at me and follow me."**



✧ Journeying into exile following Christ Julie found new beginnings. In the history of our Congregation the cross has very special significance as well. At the foot of the Coesfeld Crucifix **Sister Maria Aloysia** and **Sister Maria Ignatia** prayed to know and follow God's will. And so we can say in one sense both the story of Namur and the story of Coesfeld began with the image of a cross. And both institutes were marked by the cross from the beginning by misunderstandings and exile.



The Coesfeld Crucifix is exceptionally unique. It is believed to hold a piece of the true cross and most noticeably it is shaped in the form of a tree. It is a symbol of death and at the same time a symbol of new life. It is a perfect symbol of the promise of transformation offered to us as we live the death and resurrection which is the paschal mystery.

* **W**hat does this image of a *tree of life* hold for the Congregation in light of the founding story? *God's message made known through the prophet Ezekiel 47: 1-12 sheds light on this question.*



* Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water flowing out from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the façade of the temple was toward the east; the water flowed down from the southern side of the temple, south of the altar.

He led me outside by the north gate, and around to the outer gate facing the east, where I saw water trickling from the southern side. Then when he had walked off to the east with a measuring cord in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and had me wade through the water, which was ankle deep. He measured off another thousand and once more had me wade through the water, which was now knee deep.

Again he measured off a thousand and had me wade; the water was up to my waist.

Once more he measured off a thousand, but there was now a river through which I could not wade; for the water had risen so high it had become a river that could not be crossed except by swimming.

He asked me,

"Have you seen this, son of man?"



✧ Then he brought me to the bank of the river, where he had me sit. Along the bank of the river I saw very many trees on both sides.

He said to me.

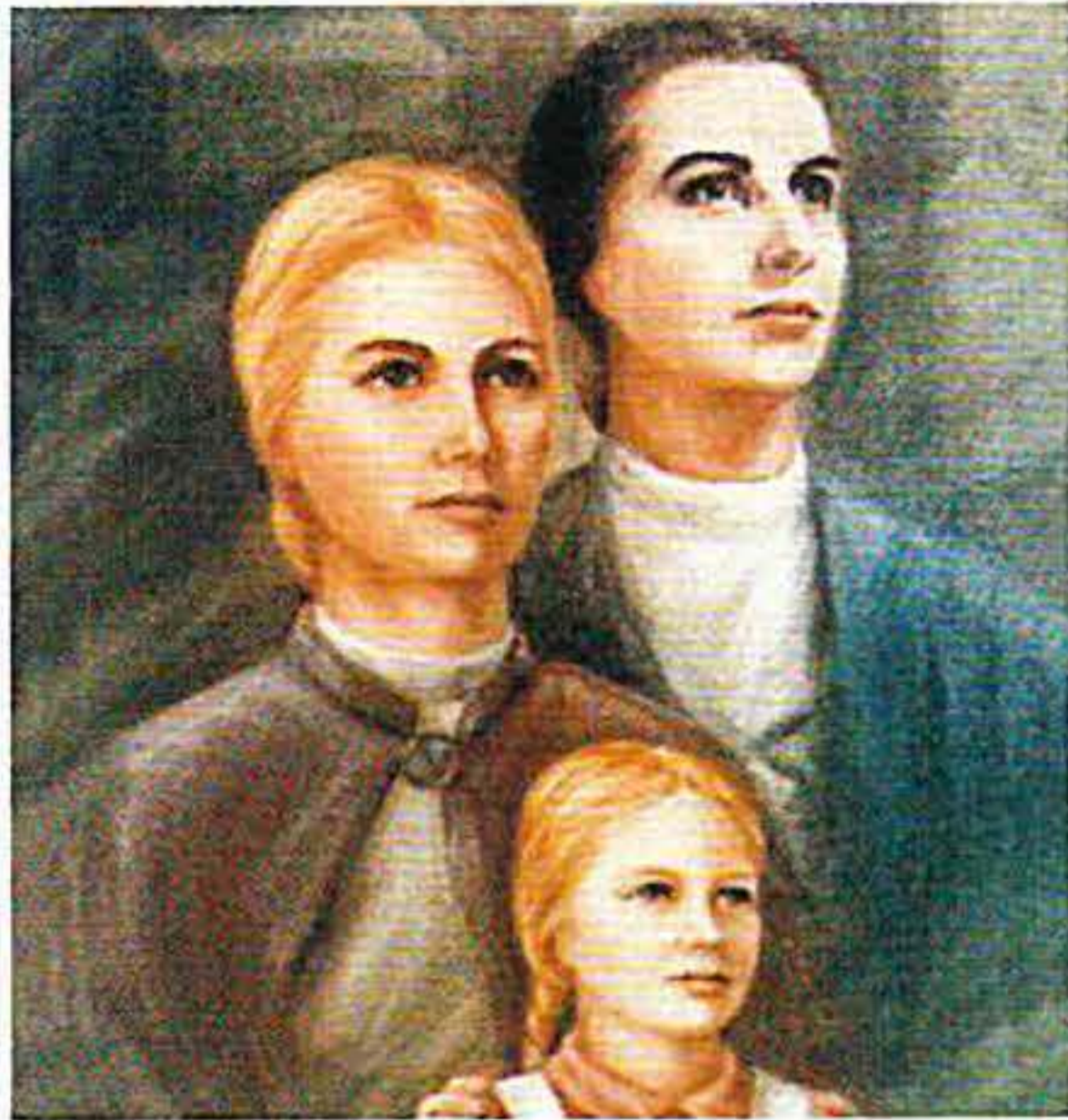
"This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah, and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh.

Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh.

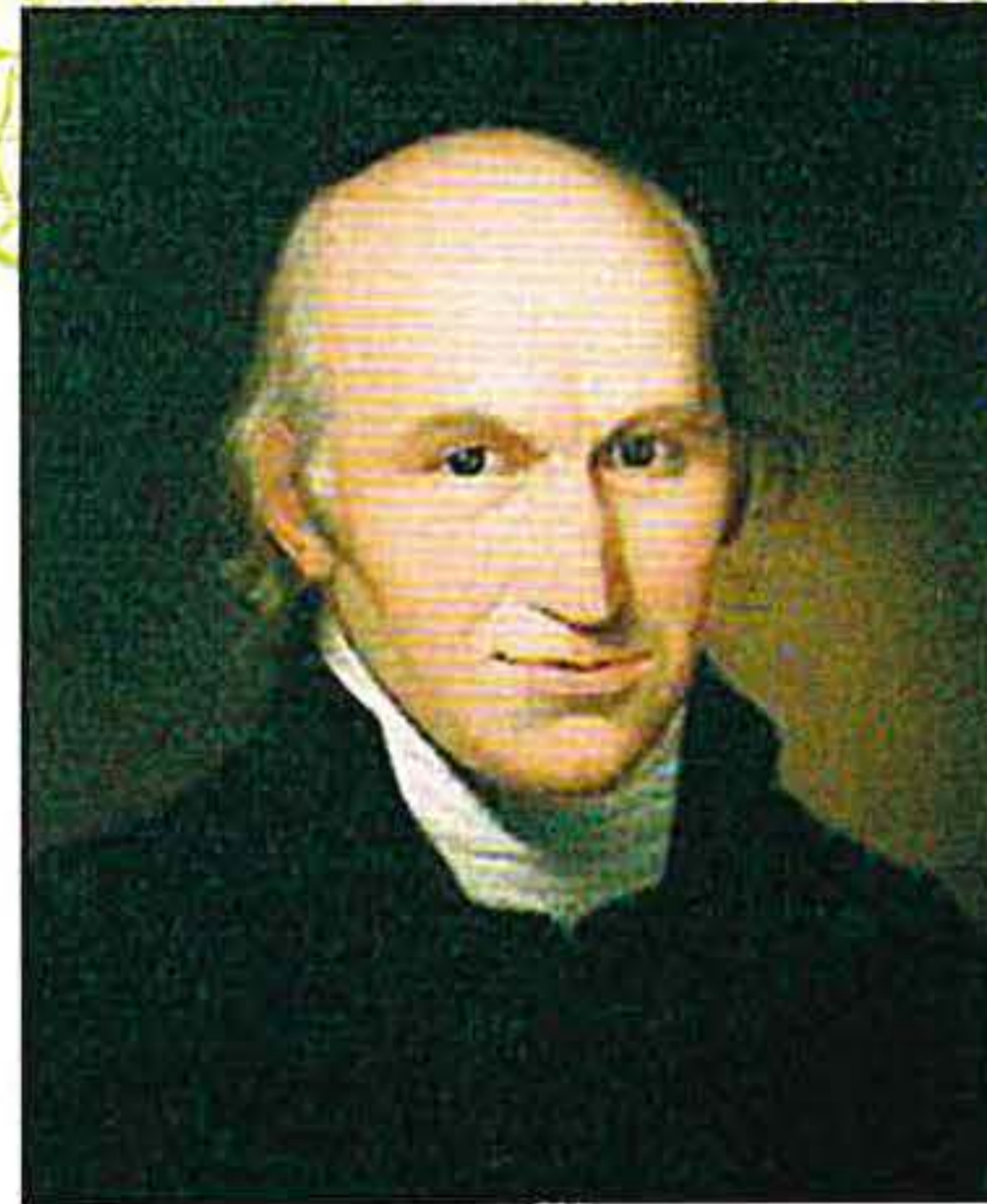
Fishermen shall be standing along it from En-gedi to En-eglam, spreading their nets there. Its kinds of fish shall be like those of the Great Sea, very numerous.

Only its marshes and swamps shall not be made fresh; they shall be left for salt.

Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine."



Hilligonde and Elisabeth



Bernard Overberg



Bishop Müller



God in his goodness and provident care called the Congregation to life as a religious institute and nourished it with the graces flowing from the river of his divine love. It was a new Tree of Life for the building up of his reign. The seed he planted was the gift of self in the persons of *Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling*. Their self-emptying for the reign of God had become a reality at the foot of the Coesfeld Crucifix-Jesus' tree of life.

The roots of this tree were nourished by the faith rich soil of Westphalia and the inspired giftedness of *Bernard Overberg*. Visionaries and prophets in the persons of *Bishop Mueller* and *Father Elting* tendered its growth. Through the loving hands of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort the powerful sunlight of St. Julie's spirituality nurtured the new Congregation.

Under the wise gardening skills of *Mother Maria Anna, Mother Maria Chrysostoma* and the courageous women who formed the community during its beginning years it grew into a tree whose strong branches are characteristic of what identifies a Sister of Notre Dame's joyful simplicity, trust in God, openness to the Holy Spirit, finding God in all things, humility, charity and obedience, Mary as model, the cross as transformative, and the Eucharist as the center of community.



With time its branches reached to the sky and spread far and wide welcoming members from all corners of the world. Abundance of life has flourished as the Congregation grew and branched out around the world bearing much fruit.

Psalm 1:3 declares, *“They are like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; its leaves never wither; whatever they do prospers.”*

God indeed has given a rich harvest to the Congregation as it ministers to bring the reign of God into the dark and broken places of our world.

Like a tree the Congregation is a living organism ever evolving. The following quote from Pope John Paul II's letter, *Vita Consecrata* #110 calls religious to celebrate their past but to look to the future.

You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.

*Sister Mary Kristin's Letter
October 1, 2012*



Mother Maria Anna



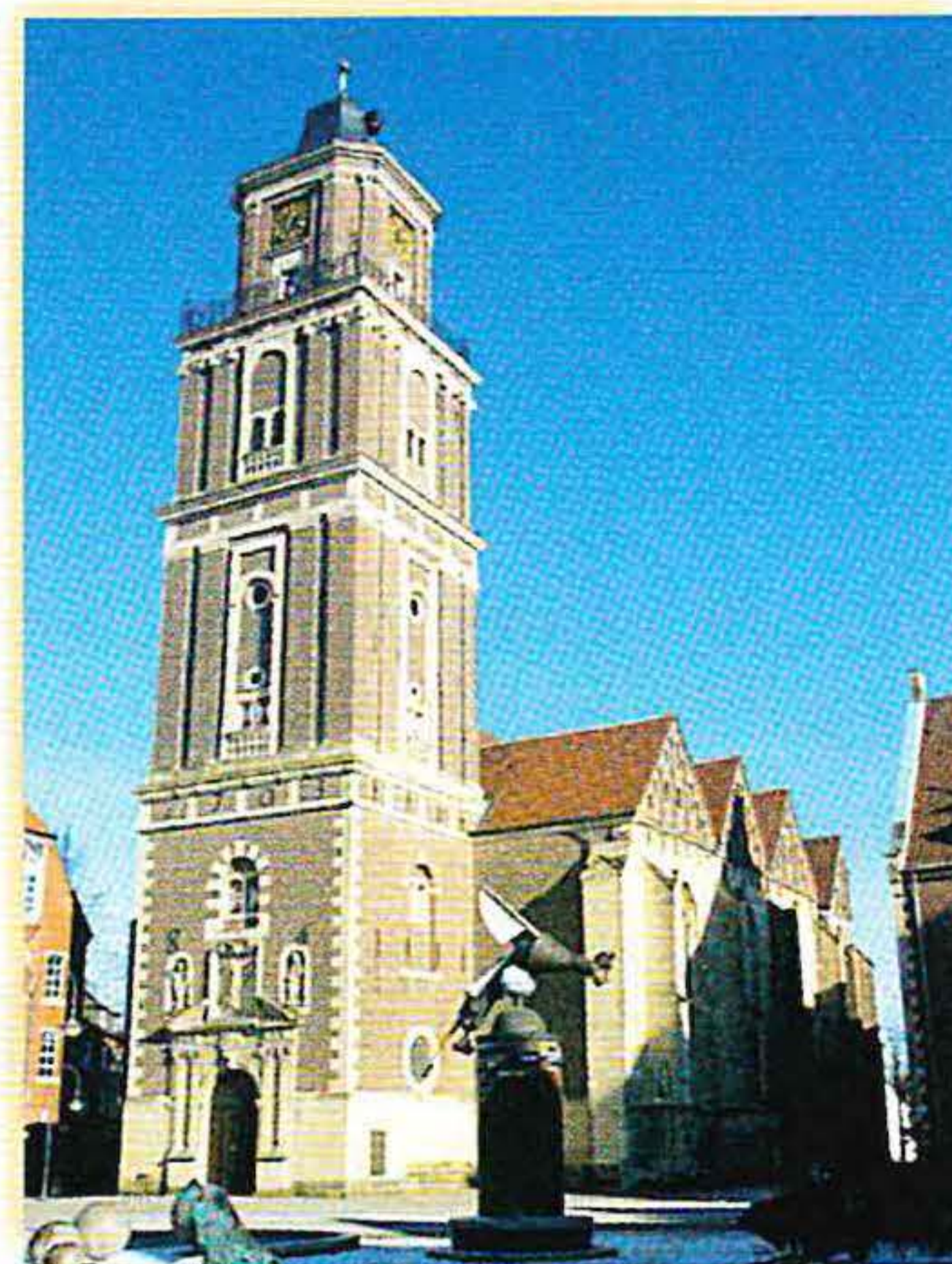
Father Elting



Sister Maria Chrysostoma

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

St. Lamberti, Coesfeld



The Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame has a history and a spirituality enriched by the contributions of faith-filled and Spirit-led men and women at a time of cultural and religious enlightenment.

The Congregation was founded in Coesfeld, Westphalia, Germany in 1850. It was planted in soil enriched by the spirituality of Westphalia and the Rhineland, by the teachings of the great educator Bernard Overberg and by the religious thought prevalent in the diocese of Münster at the beginning of the 19th century. Catholic social teachings and action were beginning to take shape in Westphalia because of the political and social circumstances. Extreme poverty was on the rise and social thinking was questioning the inequalities in society. The dignity of the individual was beginning to be a focus for Christian action. Hilgionde Wolbring, foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld, and Elisabeth Kühling, co-foundress, were daughters of Westphalia and were strongly influenced by the prevailing religious and intellectual thought of their time. Sensitive to the *“signs of the times,”* they founded an orphanage for poor abandoned children in Coesfeld.



✧

This good work by the grace of God became the beginnings of a new religious institute, the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame, Coesfeld.

Providently, the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort, the Netherlands, who had been trained in the rule and spirit of St. Julie Billiart, foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, trained the first Coesfeld sisters in religious life. In this way the Congregation of Coesfeld has a spirituality which blends the religious heritage of Westphalia with the spirituality of St. Julie.

FOUNDING OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME, COESFELD, GERMANY



W

ithin the universal Church Mary's role is second only to the dynamic action of our Triune God. Her fiat opened the door to God's incarnate presence in our world. Her engagement in the mission of her son made her his first disciple and Mother of the Church. Generations have found their inspiration in her and have turned to her with the secrets of their hearts. Mary leads souls to her son and is the most powerful of all intercessors.

Yet Mary only appears in scripture a few times and utters few recorded words. What she did by example was so profound that it was enough:



- *Mary opened herself to God's will surrendering her life to mystery.*
- *Mary centered her life on the needs of others.*
- *Mary became actively involved in the life of her son as his first disciple.*
- *Mary could let go of the past and embrace a new way of relating to God.*

Like Mary, *Hilgunde Wolbring* left few words and no codified teachings, yet her impact as the historical foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame has been profound. Her life and actions speak to us and teach us all we need to know to carry on her legacy. What does her life say to us? Let us look at her journey and reflect on her God moments and Spirit-led decisions and actions.



Hilligonde Wolbring was born on January 9, 1828 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to Otto Arnold Wolbring and Catharina Elisabeth, née Möring. The family had substantial means. When Hilligonde was 4 years old her father died and within a year her mother remarried. Shortly after this second marriage Hilligonde's mother passed away. Therefore, by the age of 7 she was orphaned and living with a stepfather and stepmother.

Concerned about her future her great uncle Gerhard Johann Wolbring brought her from Rotterdam to Stenern, Germany to live with her uncle Johann Bernard Wolbring and his wife Anna Catharina Wolbring and their children. In their home Hilligonde had the companionship of her cousins and learned religious and charitable values.

Desiring that she be well educated her great uncle made arrangements for her to live in the home of Mr. Hüsener (who had been educated in the tradition of Bernard Overberg), a retired teacher, and his wife. This made it possible for Hilligonde to attend school in Bocholt. During this time she received her first communion on May 3, 1841 at St. Georg Parish and her confirmation on July 3, 1842. To complete her education she worked at the Schulzenhof Estate "Tangerding" in Stenern in 1842 to learn housekeeping skills and management.



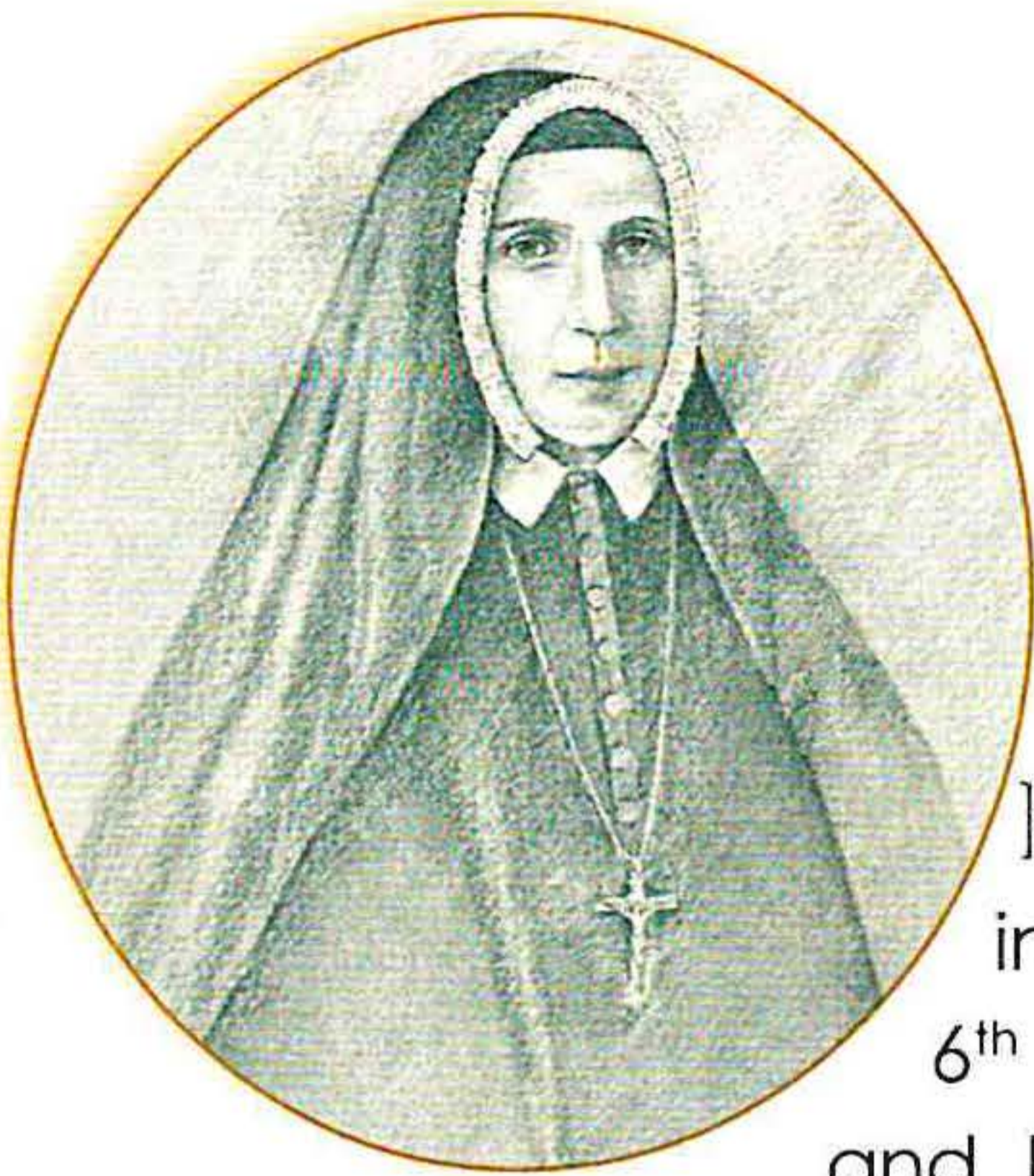
Hilligonde longed to be a teacher, a field available only to unmarried women. She confided her desire to her uncle and with his permission enrolled in the Royal Teacher Training College in Münster in 1846.

In 1848 she graduated having successfully completed the Final Examination on August 23.

Her teacher training had been in the tradition of **Bernard Overberg**, the great German educational reformer of the early 19th century. The discipline of the Royal Teacher Training College was rigorous and the lifestyle was patterned after conventual life with early morning prayers, meditation, periods of study and evening prayer. Practices common to religious community life were promoted.

From an early age Hilligonde had the desire to dedicate her life to charitable works. She expressed her desire to be a missionary and also had thoughts of opening a house for poor children in Berlin. Those to whom she confided her desires encouraged her to rather find a way to help the many poor children in the Münsterland. Following the good advice of others, upon graduation Hilligonde obtained a position as assistant teacher to **Miss Hennemann** in the lower classes of St. Lamberti School in Coesfeld. It is here that she met **Elisabeth Kühling** who was teacher of the upper classes. At the time they met, Hilligonde was 20 years old and Elisabeth 26 years old. Having common values and high ideals the two became good friends.

Founding of the Congregation of
the Sisters of Notre Dame
Coesfeld, Germany



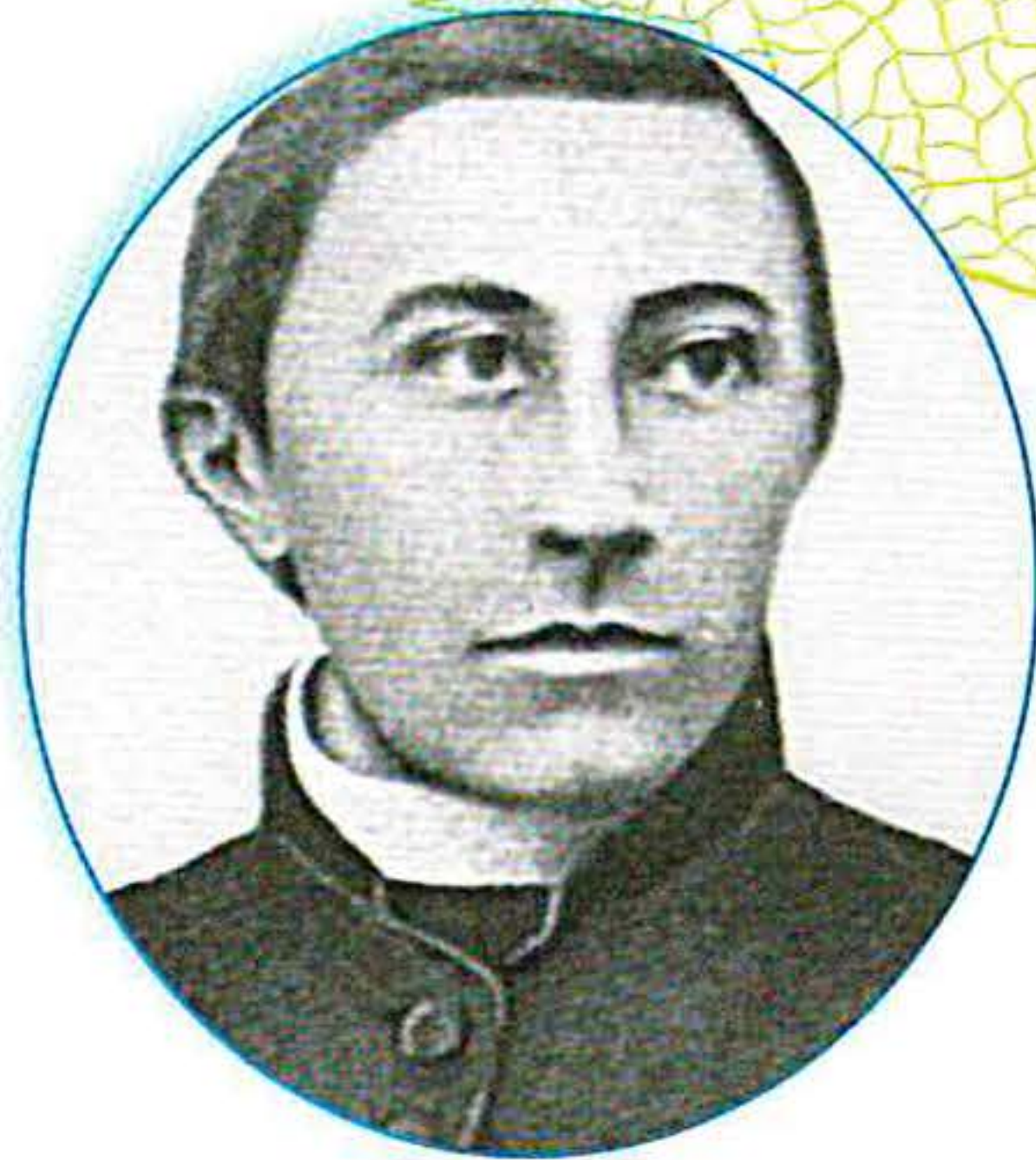
Elisabeth Kühling was born in 1822 on January 10th. She was the 6th child born to Ferdinand Kühling and Elisabeth, née Henkhues of Münster.

She made her first communion at age 13 on March 26, 1835 and confirmation the same year.

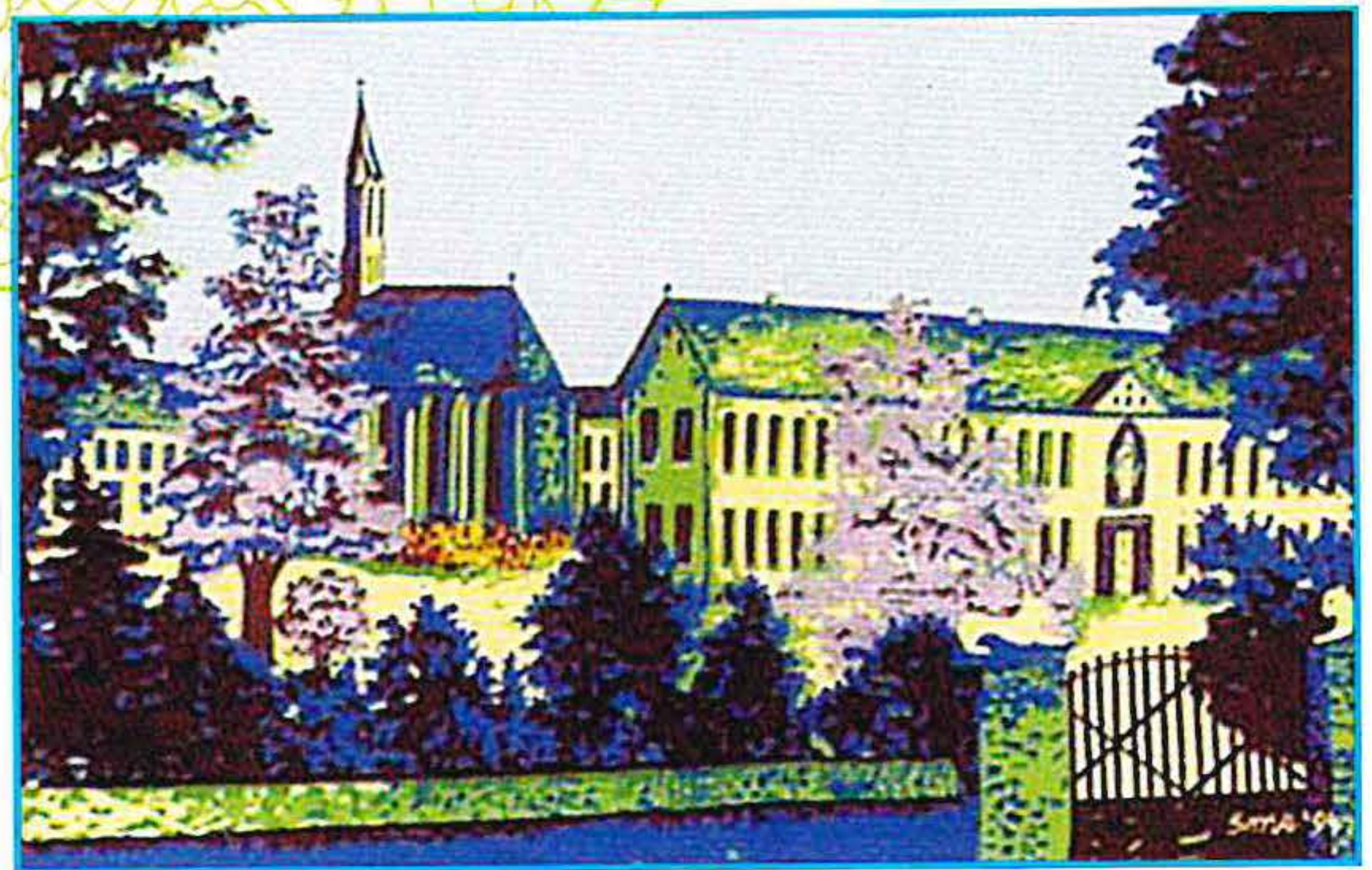
Elisabeth completed the Royal Teacher Training College on August 31, 1840. Her first teaching assignment in 1840 was the same as that of Hilligonde – to assist Miss Hennemann with the lower classes at St. Lamberti Parish, Coesfeld. By 1843 she was assigned to teach the upper classes.

In 1848 when Hilligonde and Elisabeth met, social conditions in Europe were in a state of turmoil. The industrial revolution, political upheavals, the famine due to the potato blight (1841-1849) were realities that tore at the fabric of society. Children were often the victims of this instability. Hilligonde and Elisabeth found themselves in the midst of great needs. Knowing what it meant to be an orphan Hilligonde's heart went out to the children she saw roaming the streets without the security of a safe and loving home environment. She knew what her response had to be. She needed to provide a home for these little ones. This would be the answer to her desire to dedicate her life and wealth to the service of others. In Elisabeth she found a willing helper. With the assistance of **Father Theodor Elting**, the young assistant pastor of St. Lamberti Parish, they rented a house at 42 Süring Street and on October 1, 1849 they moved into it with 7 children.

St. Annathal



Father Elting

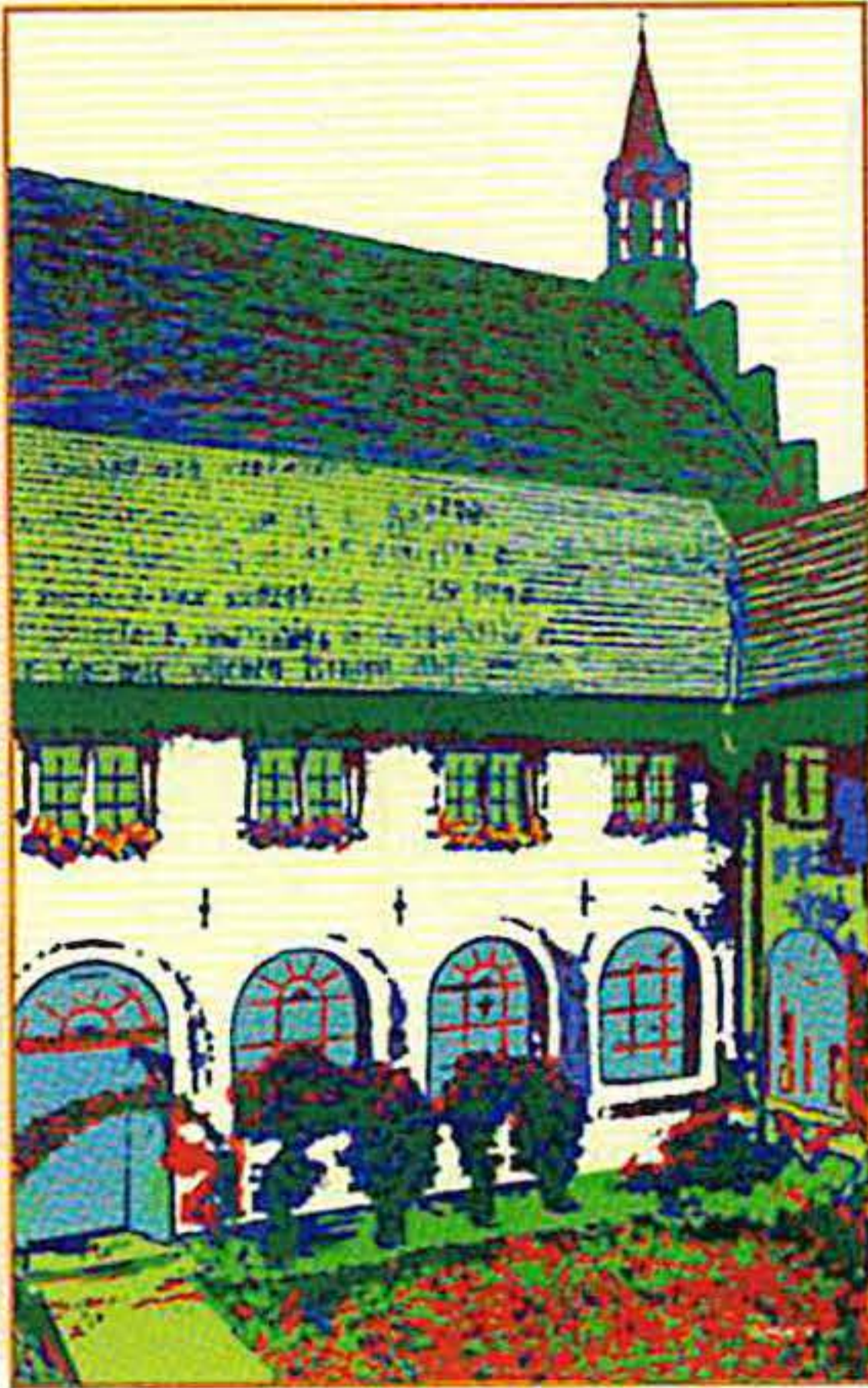


Father Theodor Elting, as advisor to the two young women immediately saw the potential in the work Hilligonde and Elisabeth were beginning. He spoke with them about establishing a religious congregation to institutionalize their work. He also discussed their undertaking with **Bishop Johann Georg Müller, Bishop of Münster**, who welcomed active apostolic religious congregations in his diocese.

Sometime in late 1849 Hilligonde and Elisabeth went through discernment before the Coesfeld Crucifix and gave their "Yes" to God to enter religious life. **Bishop Müller** delegated Father Elting to contact a religious community to establish a convent in Coesfeld and train the young women.

Bishop Müller wrote to the nobility of Westphalia asking them to financially support the establishment of a convent in Coesfeld. Through their assistance, St. Annathal, the first convent and eventual Motherhouse was purchased. Vicar General Paul Melchers of Münster put all his possessions up as security for the purchase of St. Annathal. He then suggested to the Bishop that Father Elting contact the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort, the Netherlands, to train the women because their apostolate was the education of poor girls and their style of life appropriate for active apostolic ministry.

Founding of the Congregation of
the Sisters of Notre Dame
Coesfeld, Germany



St. Annathal

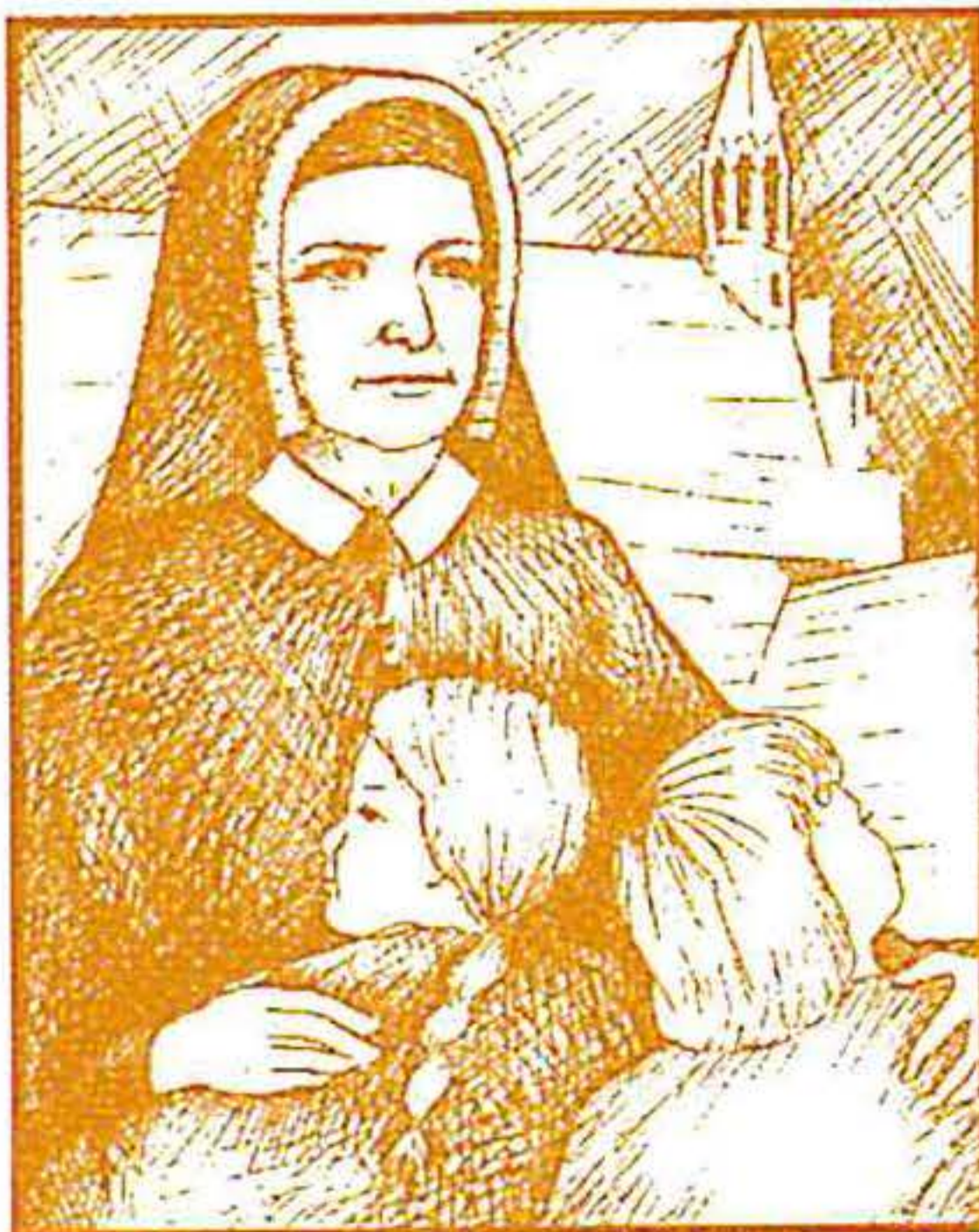


St. Annathal Gate

Bishop Müller



Because of the political situation Bishop Müller and Father Elting asked for two conditions from the Amersfoort Congregation; first, that Coesfeld be a Motherhouse with its own novitiate; secondly that the new foundation would have control over its own assets. Bishop Müller and Father Elting misunderstood the rule of Amersfoort believing it to be the rule of Peter Fourier which allows each foundation to be independent. This misunderstanding would cause tensions at a later date.

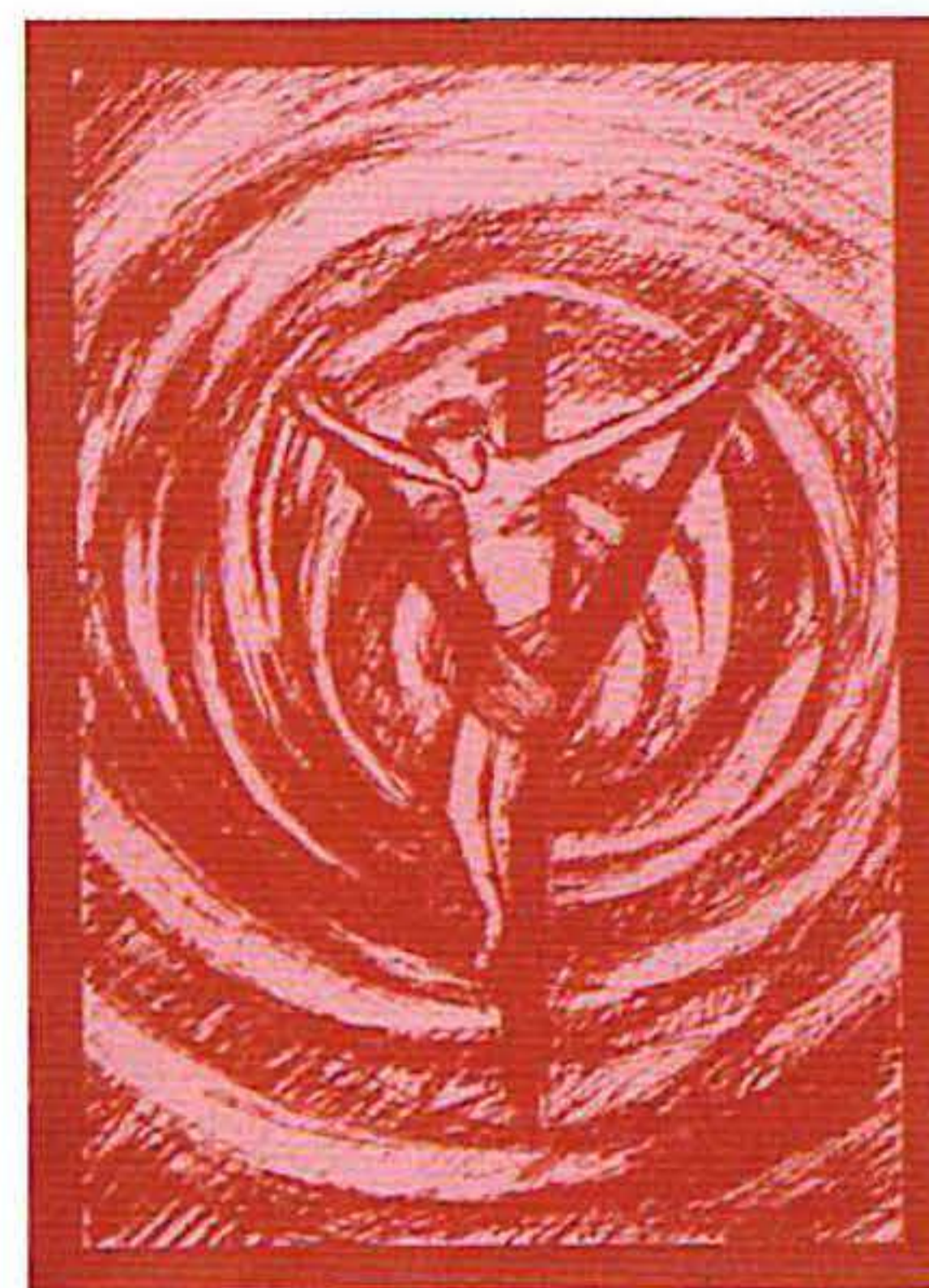


Sister Maria Aloysia

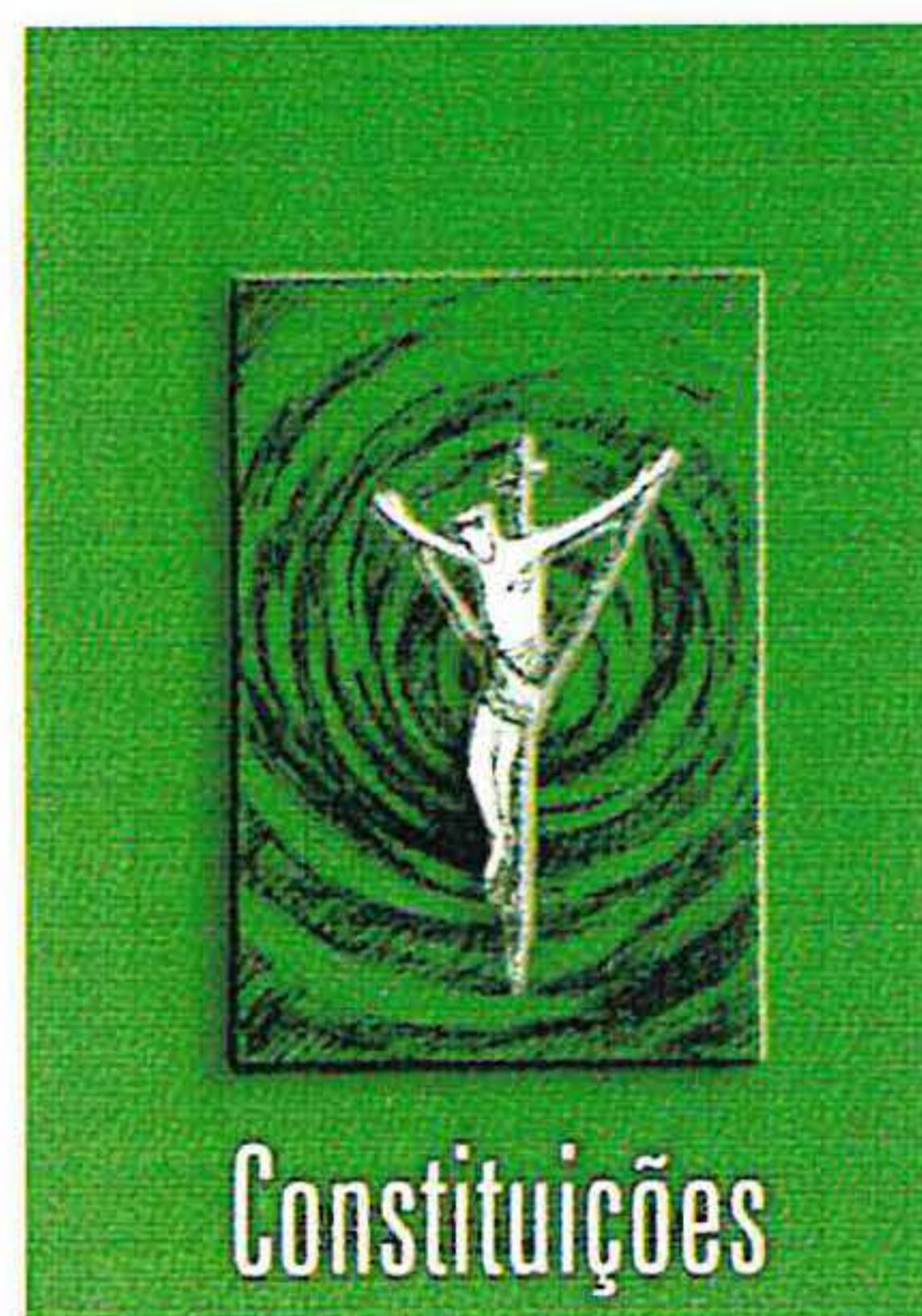


EARLY YEARS

OF THE NEW FOUNDATION



After much correspondence and negotiations Mother Marie Joseph, Superior General of Amersfoort, sent three sisters to Coesfeld to train Hilligonde and Elisabeth in religious life, Sister Marie Brigitte, Sister Marie Ursula and Sister Marie Angele. With the coming of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort Hilligonde and Elisabeth were introduced to the rule and spirit of St. Julie Billiart, foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.



In the Rule of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort the young teachers found the same spirit of love of God and neighbor and the same deep personal appreciation of the child as the highest measure of each pedagogical effort.

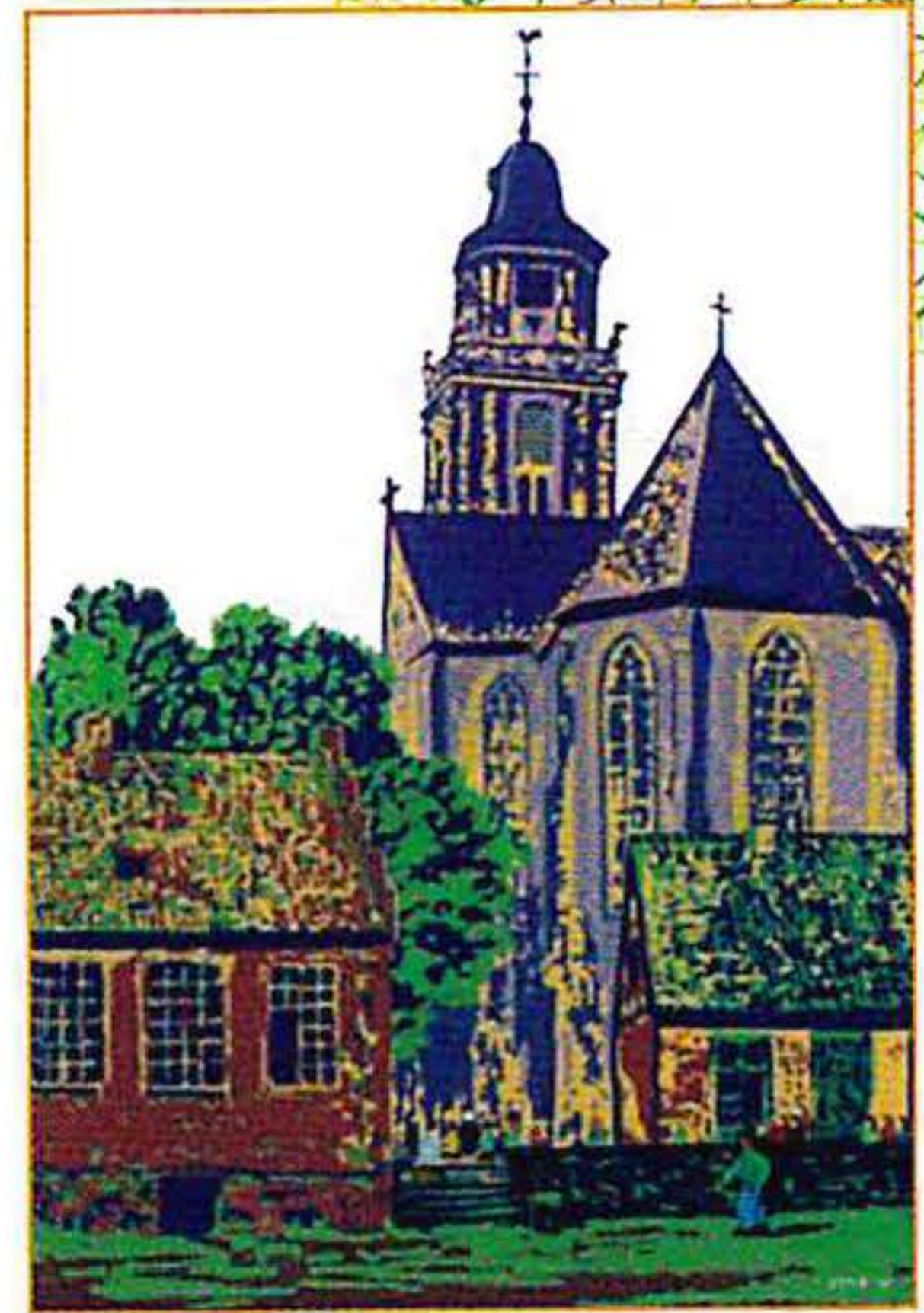
...So it was that in Coesfeld, Westphalia, the seed of a new fruitful spiritual life was planted. Thirty-four years after her death the way of life of Julie Billiart was given enthusiastic reception in the hearts of young women, who grasped the clarity and depth of her spirituality and made it their own. This disposition of spirit would become characteristic for the whole Congregation through them.

History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld, Germany,

Sr. M. Raphaelita Böckmann, SND, Sr. M. Birgitta Morthorst, SND



St. Lamberti School



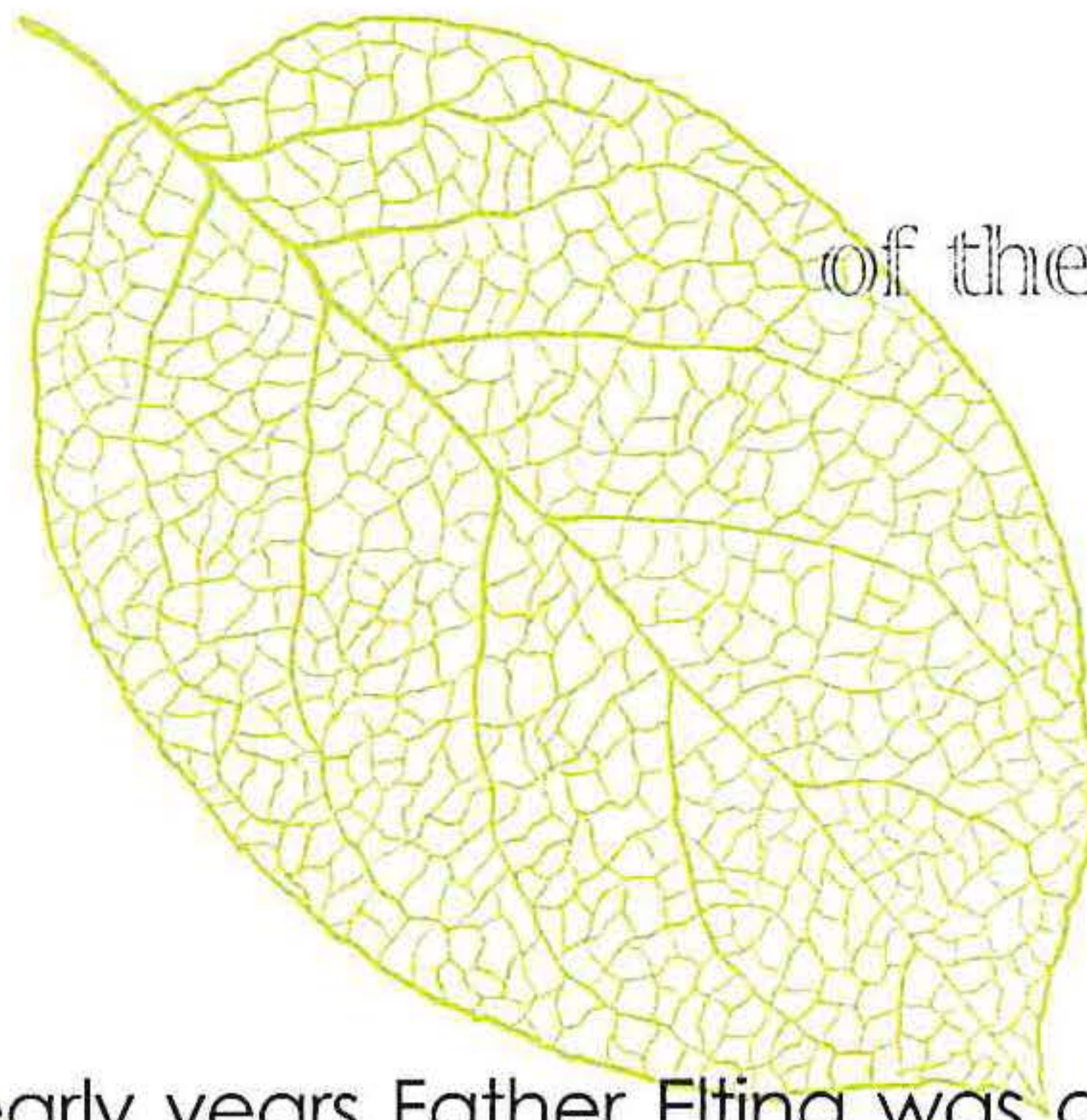
* Within 6 weeks of the arrival of the three sisters from Amersfoort Bishop Müller wrote a letter pointing out the problems arising with the State over the Coesfeld ties with a Dutch congregation. The conditions for founding an order from a foreign country were not favorable in Prussia. There were many restrictions under which foreign superiors had to operate. Regardless of this the mission of formation moved forward.

On October 1, 1850, Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling were clothed with the religious habit. Henceforth, Hilligonde was known as Sister Maria Aloysia and Elisabeth as Sister Maria Ignatia. This day came to be held as Foundation Day for the Coesfeld Congregation.

Within the first five years the Coesfeld Congregation grew rapidly. By 1853 there were 15 novices and the apostolic ministries of the sisters at St. Annathal included the following:

- *a preparant school*
- *a boarding school with the offer of a high school for girls*
- *a home for poor children*
- *a needlework school*
- *a kindergarten for 2-6 year old children*

Two affiliations were established, one in Lembeck with three sisters, and one in Aldekerk with three sisters. In Aldekerk Sister Maria Aloyisa was assigned as teacher and Sister Maria Anna (later Mother Maria Anna) was local superior and in charge of a group of elderly parishioners. By 1855, 43 postulants had been invested.



* During these early years Father Elting was appointed as the Director of the Congregation. He spent himself tirelessly doing everything possible to help the new foundation establish itself. His zeal at times conflicted with the religious spirit the Amersfoort sisters were trying to instill in the young sisters. Things came to a climax when in 1855 Mother Marie Joseph asked that Father Elting be removed from his position as Director of the Coesfeld foundation. However, Bishop Müller did not remove Father Elting as requested. In addition the Vicar General Paul Melchers from Münster in the name of Bishop Müller requested that Coesfeld become a Provincial House and that the superior and council all be German sisters named by Amersfoort but also approved by the Bishop of Münster. Mother Marie Joseph believed that this request indicated that events were leading to the new foundation becoming wholly separate from the Netherlands. She informed Bishop Müller that his ideas regarding the foundation in Coesfeld could not be reconciled with the Amersfoort rule. Therefore, shortly after the request, the Archbishop of Utrecht, Apostolic Nuncio in the Netherlands, approved the separation of the convent in Coesfeld from the congregation in Amersfoort. Bishop Müller of Münster allowed each individual sister to freely choose the congregation to which she would belong.



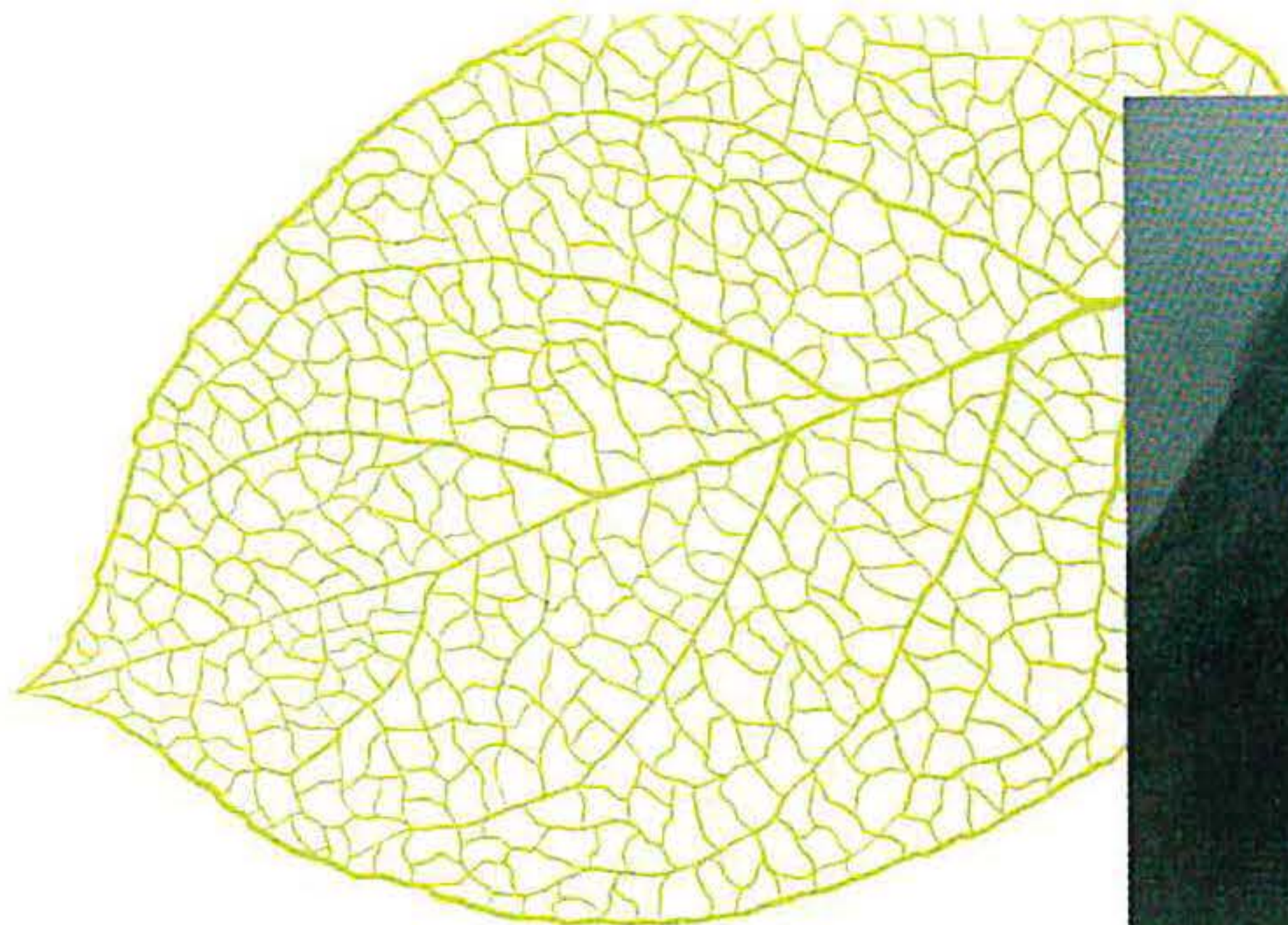
*The Motherhouse
of Amersfoort*

SEPARATION OF THE CONGREGATION IN COESFELD FROM THE CONGREGATION IN AMIERSFOORT

* **O**n June 8, 1855, Vicar General Paul Melchers came to Coesfeld to carry out the act of separation. The Coesfeld Annals of 1855 contain the following report:
At about 11:00 a.m., all the professed sisters and the novices were gathered in the assembly hall. The Vicar General addressed the group. Speaking about the circumstances that had made the separation necessary, and in the name of the Bishop, he thanked the Dutch sisters for all their efforts and cares in bringing the Congregation to thrive in Coesfeld. After this, each professed sister declared into which congregation she wished to be incorporated. The three sisters stationed in Lembeck had been brought to Coesfeld and the thirteen German sisters were present. Two of these, Sr. M. Crescentia and Sr. M. Seraphika, chose the Amersfoort Congregation, and so they joined the seven Amersfoort sisters who were present at the moment in Coesfeld. The eleven others made up the Coesfeld Congregation. Sisters M. Benedikta, M. Baptista, M. Walburga and M. Willibrorda, who had been transferred to Holland prior to this, wished to remain there... All of the novices decided to remain in Coesfeld.

Immediately, the German sisters elected from among themselves a provisional superior, namely, Sister Maria Anna. The Vicar General declared Sr. M. Anna the temporary superior, then removed his biretta from his head, and ***“In the name and the commission of Bishop Johann Georg, he solemnly declared in the Name of the Most Holy Trinity that Coesfeld was the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Germany.”***

History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld, Germany.



*Mother M. Anna
Scheffer-Boichorst*



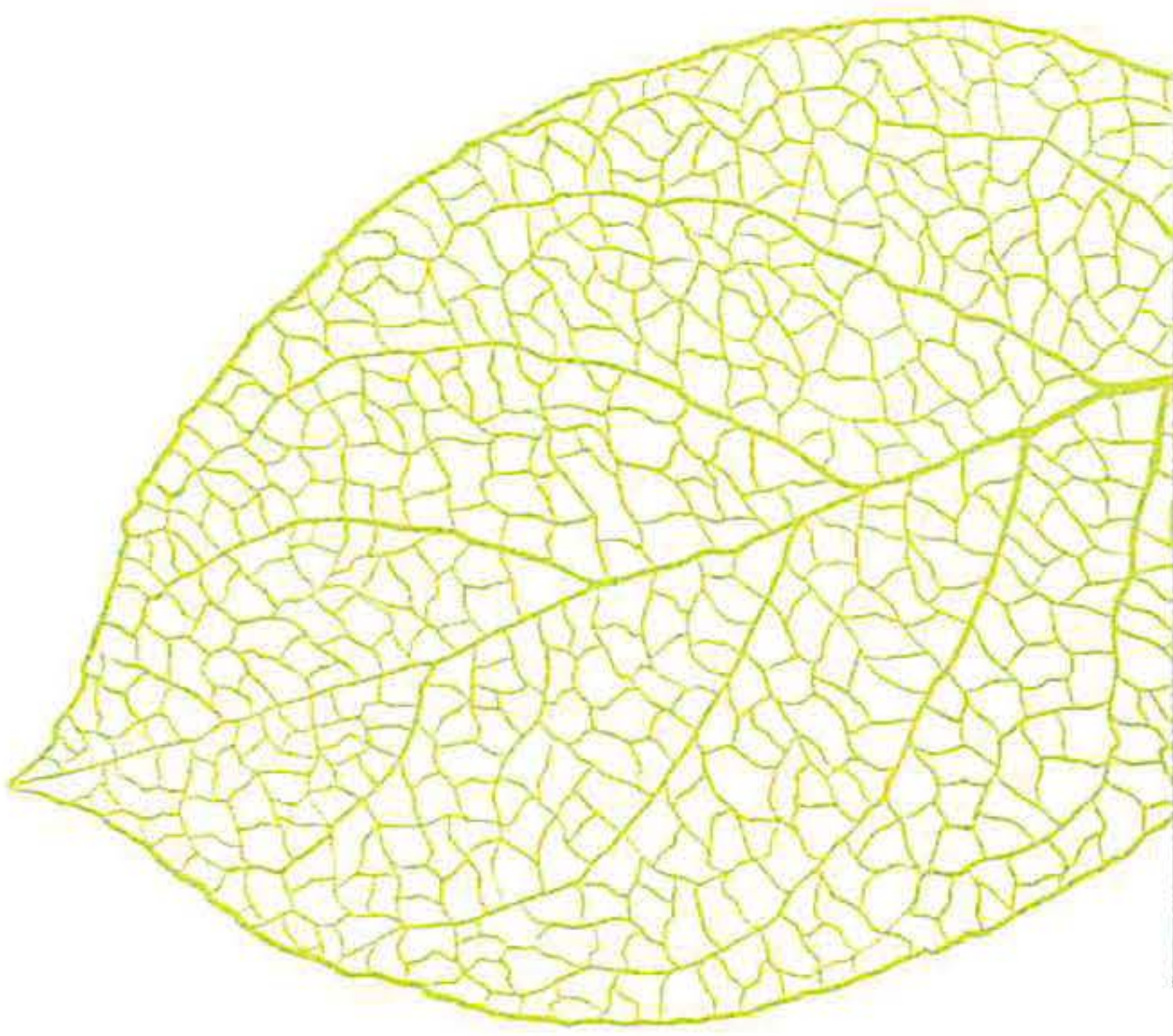
*Maria
Scheffer-Boichorst*



It must be noted that at first when the community in Coesfeld heard that a separation was forth coming the young sisters were very hesitant to separate from Amersfoort. They were given two days to reflect on their decision. At first emotions favored Amersfoort. Then Father Elting asked them if they would be less hesitant to stay in Coesfeld if Sister Maria Anna were their superior. This prospect must have settled the group. The greater majority chose Coesfeld and they did indeed vote for Sister Maria Anna as their first superior general.

The new institute of 11 professed sisters and 22 novices flourished under the leadership of Mother Maria Anna who after being provisional superior was elected the first superior general in a canonical election in 1856. Soon more schools and new ministries were accepted by the Congregation. There was much promise for a bright future. During the 17 years she was superior general she accepted 241 young Sisters into the Congregation. She opened 29 of the 32 local houses where sisters ministered to 5,899 students.

Mother Maria Anna came from a prominent family of attorneys in Münster. She was born on January 13, 1815, to Joseph Scheffer-Boichorst and Elisabeth, née Meiners, in Münster. Upon the early death of her mother she assumed the care of her father. When he died she moved into the



Josephine Heck



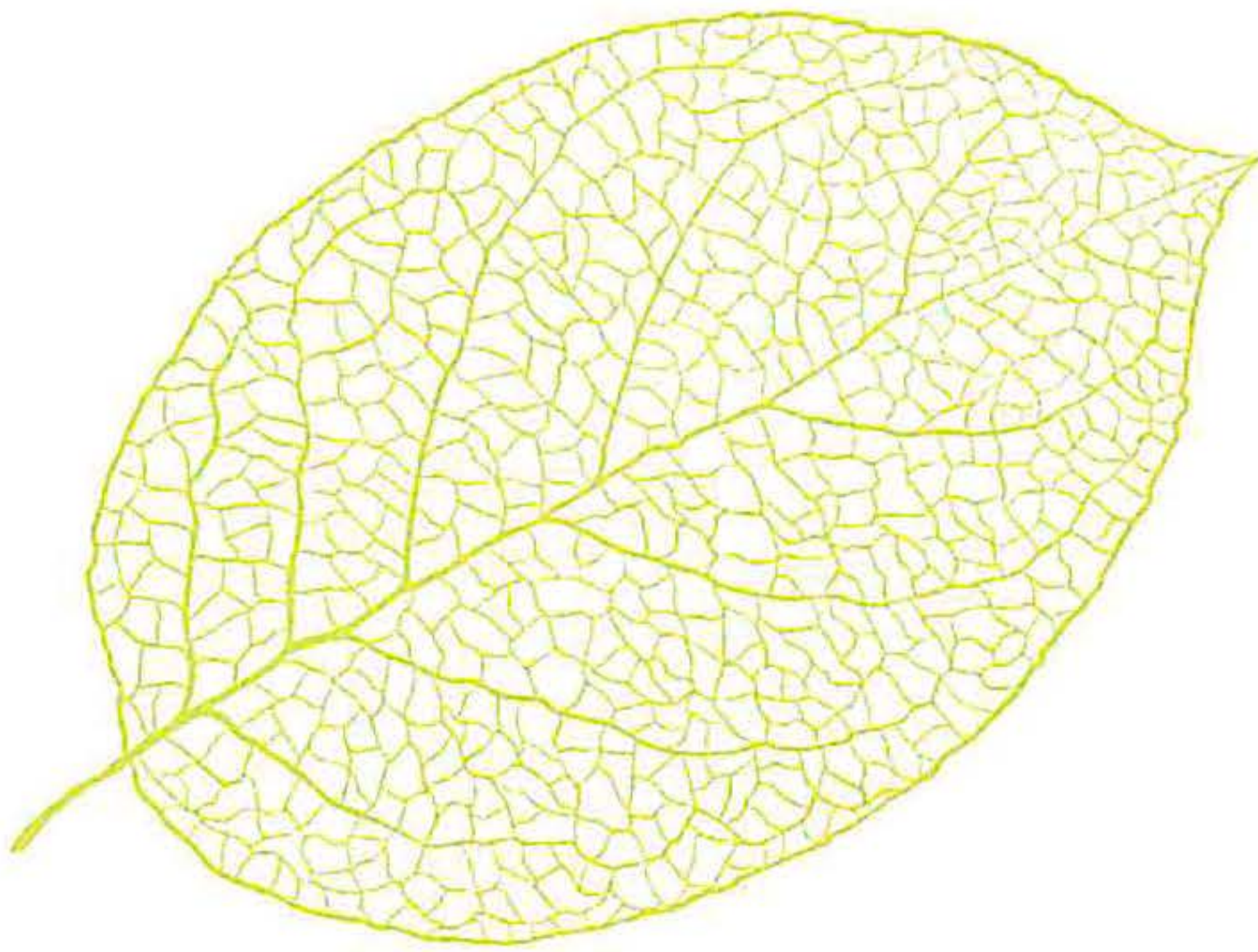
Mother
M. Chrysostoma Heck

home of her sister Antoinette who was married to Arnold Schlüter of Münster. In the Schlüter home Maria came to associate with a group of intellectuals and leading personalities of the time who met for lively discourse regarding religion and social concerns. Eventually, she came to believe she had a religious vocation and through Vicar General Paul Melchers was led to the Sisters of Notre Dame in Coesfeld where she entered on August 6, 1850.

After Mother Maria Anna took over the duties of superior Sister Maria Aloysia became local superior in Aldekerk. She remained there a total of 6 years. Her next assignment was Uedem where she was teacher of the girls's upper grades and local superior for 15 years.

After the death of Mother Maria Anna in 1872, **Mother Maria Chrysostoma** was elected Superior General. At the time of the Kulturkampf she made the decision to accept the invitation to minister in the United States and accompanied the first group of sisters on their journey in May 1874. Sister Maria Aloysia went along so that she would have a travel companion on her return trip. However, there was a shortage of a teacher and a cook at St. Peter's in Cleveland and Sister Maria Aloysia immediately volunteered to stay with the pioneer group. Thus, she became teacher of the intermediate grades at St. Peter's Parish, local superior, sacristan and cook. She oversaw the welfare of the sisters in the United States until Sister Maria Modesta came to assume the role of superior in 1875. Over the next two years more than 200 sisters left Germany for ministry in the United States.

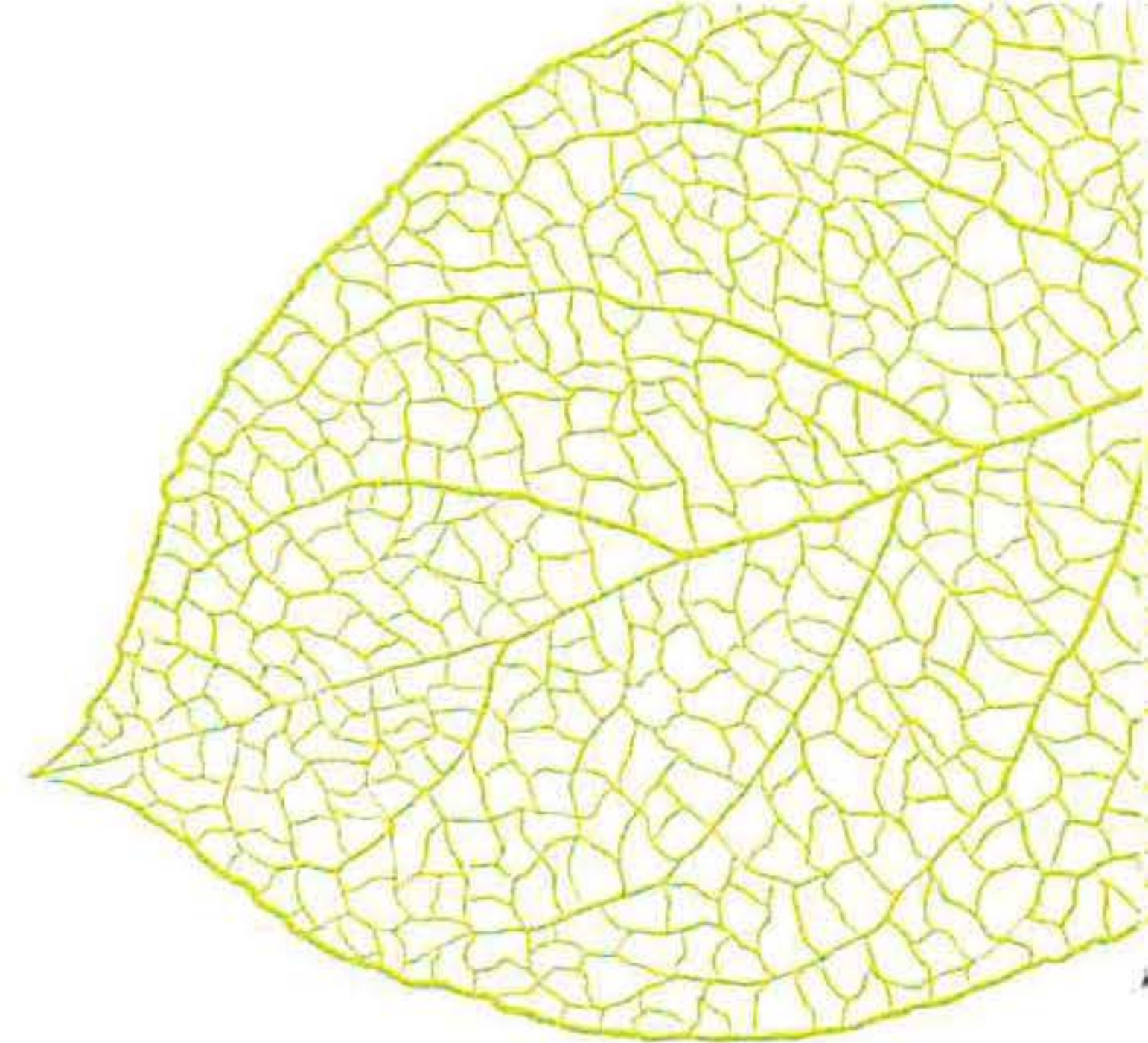
Separation of the Congregation in Coesfeld
from the Congregation
in Amersfoort



From 1881-1886 Sister Maria Aloysia was stationed in Delphos, Ohio, as teacher, local superior and in charge of the elderly. In 1886 she became local superior of Mount St. Mary's, Cleveland, a children's home and infirmary. Here her dream of being able to care for orphan children was finally fulfilled. In 1888 she witnessed the return of Mother Maria Chrysostoma and some of the sisters to Germany. Her own life was quickly drawing to a close. She died on May 6, 1889 during a severe heat wave. Because of circumstances her burial had to be soon after death. Sister Maria Modesta, Sister Maria Casimira and Sister Maria Raphaele were the entire funeral cortege. Mother Maria Chrysostoma wrote the following letter to notify the sisters of Sister Maria Aloysia's death.



Mount St. Mary's Orphanage



Dearly Beloved Sisters,

My message to you today is one of deep sorrow, but as full of joy and peace as of edification. Our dear eldest daughter, Sister Maria Aloysia, "No. 1" in the Congregation, though she used "No. 2" left us on May 6, to receive the crown which the Lord has prepared for the prudent virgins. She is with God; this is my confident hope. You, my dear Sisters, know that Sister Maria Aloysia is the foundress of the German Institute of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld. She offered her person and her activity together with her excellent gifts of soul and body to God for His greater honor and glory. She made this sacrifice that her own soul might daily grow in virtue and grace, and that as many souls as possible might be brought into the one fold of the Divine Shepherd.

...Our dear departed Sister Maria Aloysia was my traveling companion when the first group of Sisters came to America. When the religious were exiled from Germany, she offered of her own accord to assist me in establishing the Sisters in the American mission field. When after a three months' stay, my return to Europe was found imperative and I embarked once more for the homeland, she could not force herself to leave a field of labor that was so completely according to her heart's desires, and has grown so dear to her. She was deeply grateful for the privilege of remaining in this newly founded vineyard of the Lord. Here this good soul helped me in the early days in appointing and arranging everything in the first affiliations, herself carrying coal, furniture, in short, taking a hand at the many, many things that needed to be done. Still, she was then fifty years of age. With touching persistence, Sister applied herself to the study of English, and taught a large class of girls in St. Peter's school. It was her joy to remain in active teaching service as long as possible.

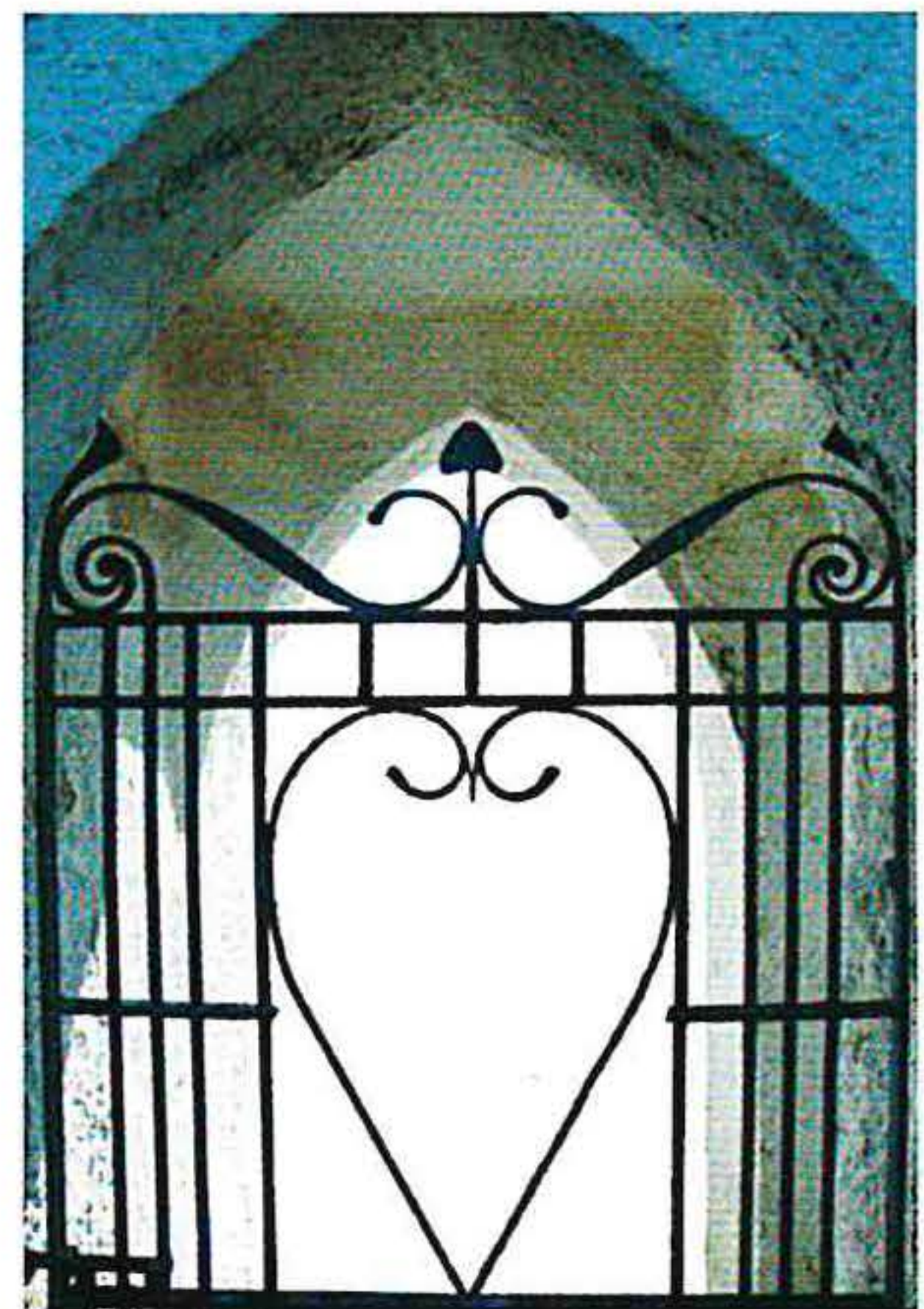
Separation of the Congregation
in Coesfeld from
the Congregation in Amersfoort

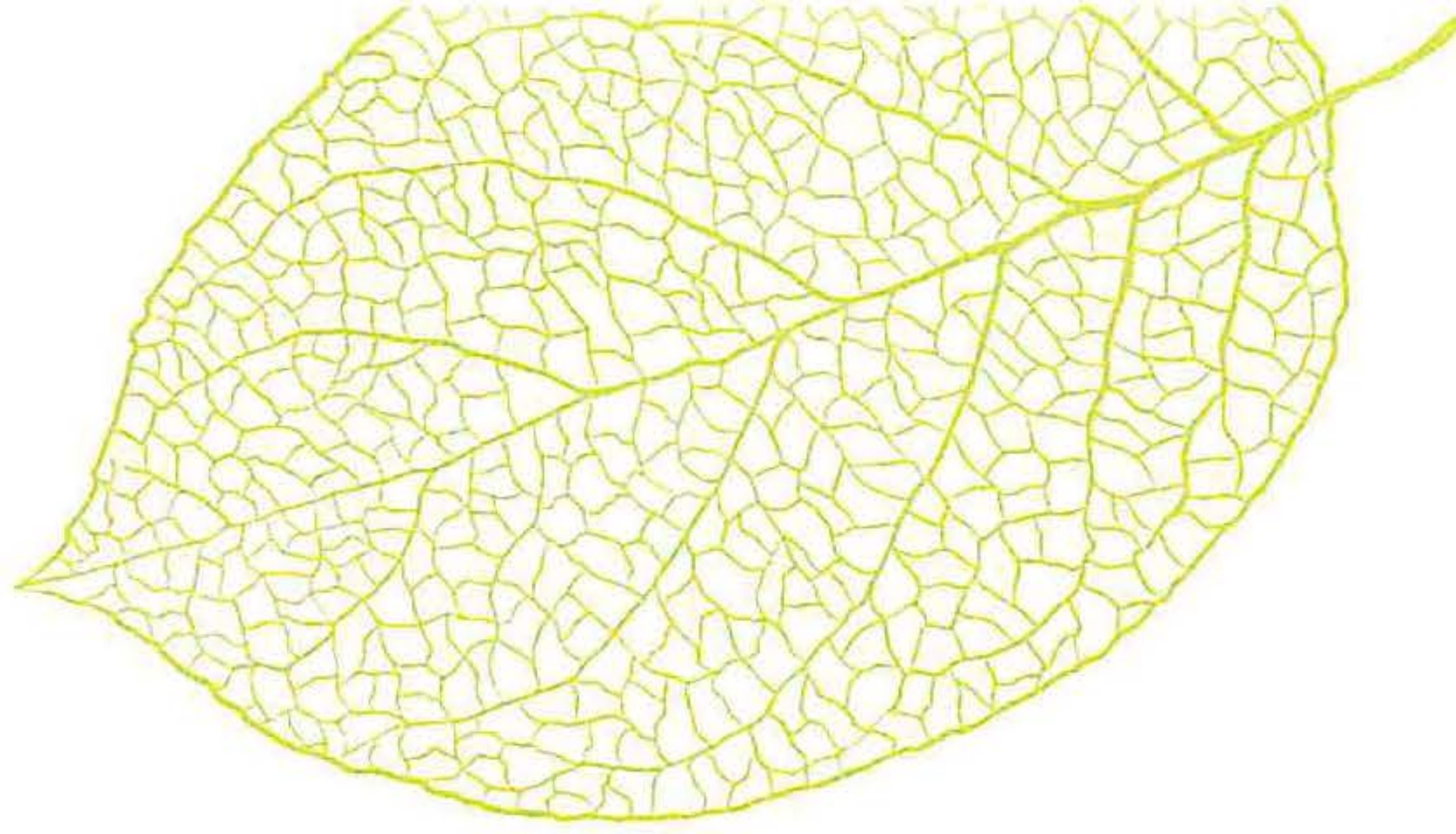
Sister Maria Modesta



During the last years of her life Sister Maria Aloysia was local superior of Mount St. Mary's Institute for Girls located in the midst of extensive woods on Woodland Hills, not far from the Provincial Motherhouse in Cleveland. There she remained active to the very last.

When I asked her, because of her advanced age, before making this appointment, whether she felt equal to the duties and responsibilities that would devolve upon her in her new charge in this institution, big tears rolled down her cheeks, and thanking me most heartily for the beautiful office entrusted to her – to be the mother of orphans – she added: “Oh, dear Reverend Mother, ever since my entrance into the Congregation such a charge has been my heart’s desire, but I always hesitated to mention it to my Superiors for fear of violating religious obedience, or in the least, expressing a preference. But now I am exceedingly happy and thank God for fulfilling, at the long last, this ardent wish of mine.” With these prefatory remarks you will better understand the following excerpt from the letter of our Ven. Provincial Superior, Sister Maria Modesta, in which I know you are all deeply interested. In her letter to me, Sister Maria Modesta writes (only excerpts follow):





"From Tuesday in Holy Week until Good Friday I was at Mount St. Mary's visiting with the dear patient. I spent much of my time at her bedside, where we talked over the interests of the Congregation from its beginnings to the present. Sister Maria Aloysia herself never touched upon these things in conversation because of the important part she necessarily played in the whole matter. But it was always a source of joy to her when the sisters expressed their gratitude toward God for His love and mercy evident in the founding and growth of our Congregation. These hours of intimate conversation were such a boon to her that when we had finished, she assured me that now she felt relieved, whereas before, her heart had been heavy with a strange feeling of uncertainty.

'Now that you have been here,' she quietly said, 'and we have once more talked over everything. I am satisfied and truly happy, thank God. ...' I felt privileged in being able to say many a comforting and assuring word to this saintly pioneer, whom I have known since 1852 as a member of the Congregation. I was overjoyed in the thought of affording comfort and relief to this noble and generous soul. It was a great satisfaction for me to be able to enhance the joy she felt at the approach of her last hour and of the intimate union with her Creator in death..."



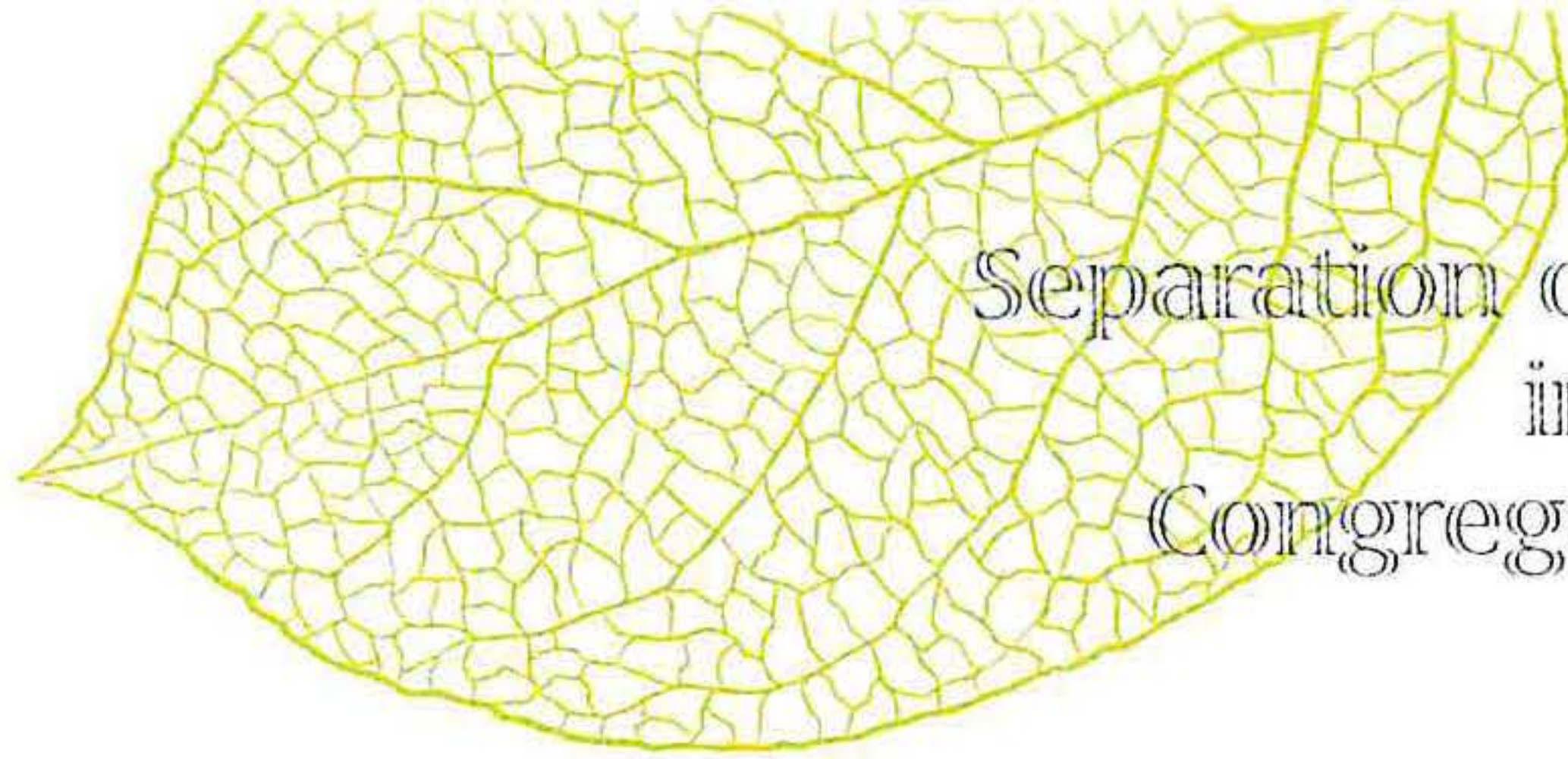
Sister Maria Aloysia

Separation of the Congregation in Coesfeld from the Congregation in Amersfoort

Truly, our loving God made "gold out of stones," through the simple, unassuming life of Sister Maria Aloysia. As the historical foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld she began a path to holiness that to date, close to 8,000 women have followed serving the Church by building up the reign of God on 5 continents.

After the separation from Amersfoort Sister Maria Ignatia continued to teach at St. Lamberti School as well as teaching basic pedagogy in the preparant school which had begun in 1852. After the typhus epidemic during which she herself was very sick, she became the First Assistant to Mother Maria Anna. She also continued in the preparant school where she taught pedagogy, French, drawing, calligraphy and Italian. Sister Maria Ignatia became the novice directress on February 6, 1858 at the age of 36. She prepared 14 postulants for investment in 1858. During her eleven years as novice mistress she prepared 117 novices for their perpetual profession in the Congregation. She possessed a fine ability to convey values to young people, to motivate them for high ideals and to give them guidance that was oriented toward clear goals. On November 8, 1869 she died of cancer at the age of 47.

Sister Maria Ignatia emphasized to her novices that the Eucharist must be the center of their day. She had an intense devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Our Lady. She would encourage a positive attitude toward all saying, "Be like the bee. Close your eyes to your Sisters' mistakes, and open them only to their virtues". Compassion and preferential love for the poor were priorities for her; "If you give



Separation of the Congregation in Coesfeld from the Congregation in Amersfoort



Sister Maria Ignatia

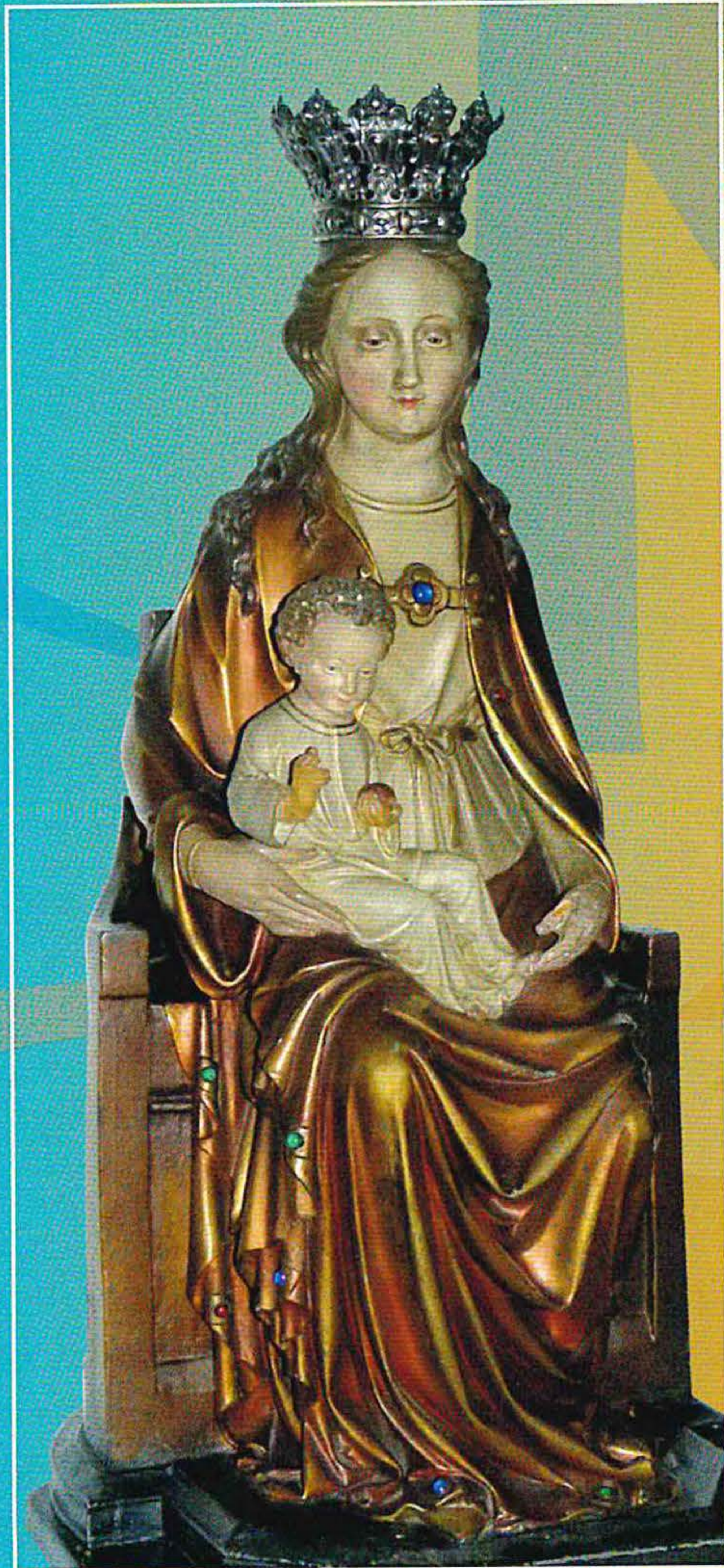
more love to some than to others then let it be to the poorest, the most neglected and abandoned... those for whom no one cares."

Sister Maria Ignatia desired not only to introduce the novices to a solid and sound spirituality of Notre Dame, but also devoted much time and energy to "a thorough, conscientious schooling for the tasks of education. As she herself had been trained to be a teacher whose activity was directed to the personal dignity of the child and youth, so she also directed the novices to see the image of God in each child, indeed, in the spirit of **Bernard Overberg**, to see the beloved God.

History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld, Germany,

Sr. M. Raphaelita Böckmann, SND, Sr. M. Birgitta Morthorst, SND

- ✧ Sister Maria Aloysia and Sister Maria Ignatia gave the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame the greatest of all gifts – their youthful enthusiasm and idealism which set in motion the events that led to its founding.

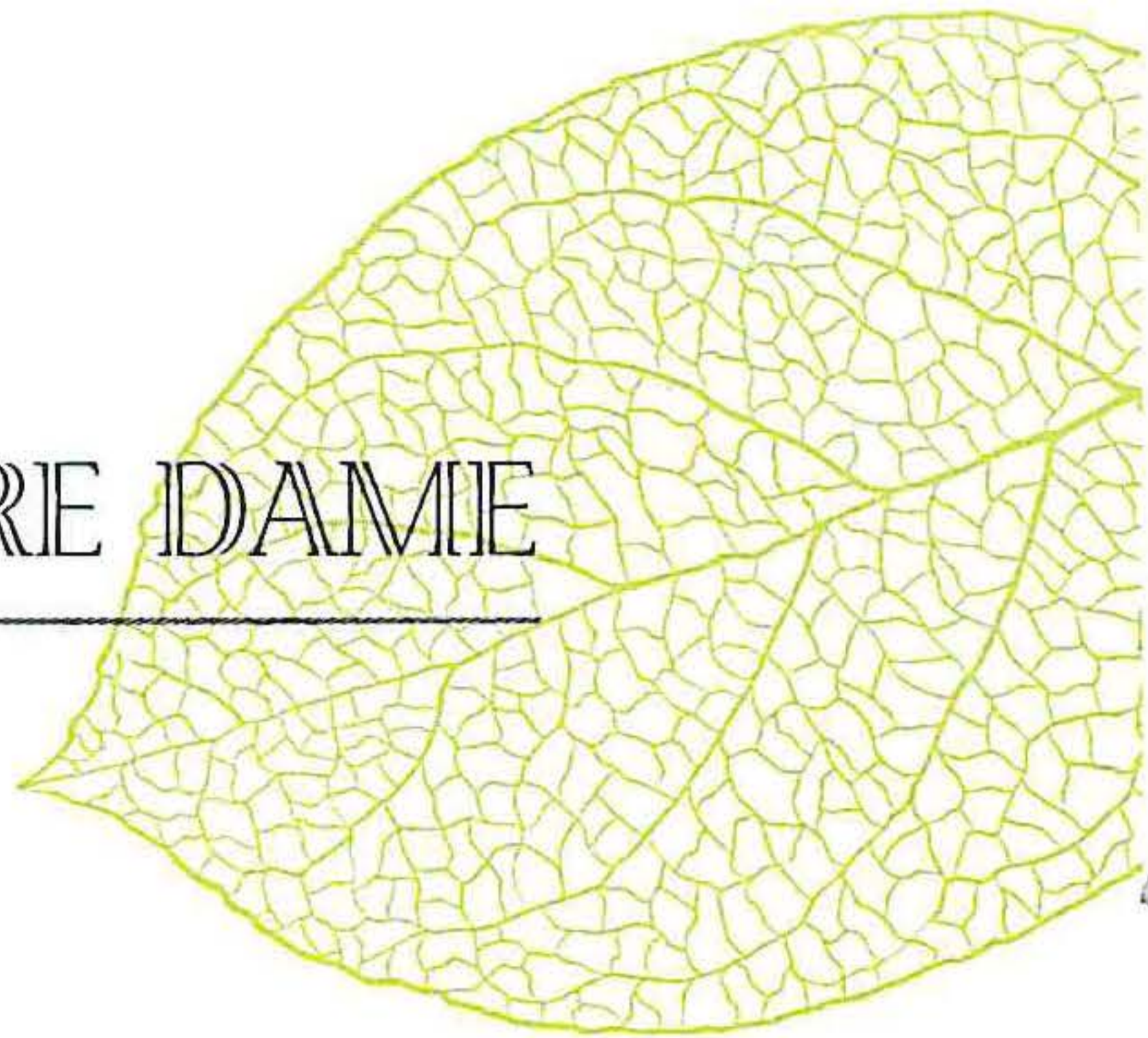


Mary Queen of the Rosary
This statue has been in the Mülhausen chapel since 1895.

SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME


OF COESFELD



T

he religious beliefs and attitudes of Westphalia and the Rhineland contributed to the overall spirituality of the Coesfeld Congregation. These were simplicity of life, care of others, trust in God's providence, and profound centeredness in God. These spiritual orientations were enhanced by the teachings of Bernard Overberg who saw God as loving Creator always at work to bring creation to its highest potential. Overberg taught that God exercised his provident care through human beings who were to bear responsibility for others. Love was the core of all relationships and each person was to be given dignity and respect and helped to grow as the beloved of God.

The more immediate spiritual heritage of the Coesfeld Congregation was the lived witness of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort and the rule of St. Julie Billiart. The rule emphasized charity as the highest law of the Congregation and the virtues of humility, charity and obedience. In 1884 Mother Maria Chrysostoma met the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur from Reading, Ohio for the first time while in Covington. At this meeting she came to learn that the Constitutions of Coesfeld and Namur were the same with very few differences. At this meeting she received a biography of the life of Julie Billiart. From this time on the spirituality of Julie became more integrated into the Coesfeld Congregation. The spirituality of Julie was based on her experience of a good God whom she desired to make known and loved, the following of Jesus who loved the Father and was obedient to his universal mission, the love of Mary, and the acceptance of the cross as a means of transformation. Julie was a woman of prayer and action – an active contemplative.



Joyful simplicity was the outward manifestation of living life based on Julie's spirituality.

The spirituality of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld is a blend of the spirituality of 19th century Westphalia and the spirituality of St. Julie. The charism of the Congregation is expressed as:

a deep experience of God's goodness and provident care.

This charism is lived out in mission and expresses Notre Dame spirituality. Notre Dame spirituality is best stated in the following way: Sisters of Notre Dame are missioned to...

incarnate the love of our good and provident God.

Important aspects of Notre Dame spirituality are:

Mary as model of discipleship

Joyful simplicity


Humility, charity, obedience.

The cross as transformative

Eucharist as the center of community

Openness to the Holy Spirit

Finding God in all things.



The charism and lived spirituality take on new expressions in different times and places in response to the needs of the religious and social context. Spirit-led creative fidelity moves the Congregation into new realms of ministry so that the love of a good and provident God may continue to enfold his people.



• ADDENDUM •

ST. JULIE BILLIART

Foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

————— and —————

*Spiritual Mother of the Sisters of Notre Dame
of Amersfoort and Coesfeld*



Marie Rose Julie Billiart was born to Jean François Billiart and Marie Louise Antoinette Billiart in 1751 in Cuvilly, France. Her family was of modest means but fell into poverty during the turbulent time just prior to the French Revolution. Julie found herself as a young girl having to take the job of a day laborer in the fields to help earn money for her family. An attempt on her father's life traumatized her and subsequent medical treatment left her with paralysis. For many years she was disabled.

Her great joy was as a catechist spreading the faith wherever and whenever she could. Because of her fidelity to the Catholic Faith she was a target during the French Revolution. She spent several years in hiding, narrowly escaping the guillotine. Her deep faith and spiritual wisdom drew a circle of pious women friends around her, among them, Françoise Blin de Bourdon of noble birth and financial means.

While convalescing in Compiègne, France, she had a vision in which she saw a crucifix with women in religious garb gathered around it and heard a voice say to her, "These are the daughters I will give you in the institute that will be marked by my cross." With time Julie came to understand that God was calling her to found a religious institute. After much discernment Julie founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur with the assistance of her good friend Françoise Blin de Bourdon in 1804.

St. Julie "Rapture in Action"



* Julie was miraculously cured of her paralysis after making a novena to the Sacred Heart and obeying the command of her spiritual director Père Enfantin to walk. Two more visions confirmed for her that her congregation was to be universal and that she was to follow Christ wherever he would lead. Because of misunderstandings with local Church authorities Julie re-established her congregation in Namur, Belgium, so that she would have the freedom to minister beyond national borders. She told her sisters, "You must have hearts as wide as the world."

Julie's spirituality was based on her deep love of the good God. She is quoted as having often said, "Ah, qu'il est bon, le bon Dieu!" "Oh, how good is the good God." God manifested his goodness in the person of Jesus Christ and Julie followed Jesus as an active apostolic consecrated woman. She loved the good God as Jesus loved him. The cross held an important place in her spirituality. The cross was, however, carried with joy. It was understood as the means for transformation and necessary for being effective in the apostolate. Joyful simplicity was the result of living life centered on the good God.

Julie was known as the smiling saint because she was always joyful. Although incredibly active, Julie was a woman of prayer and deep contemplation. She promoted a spirituality of "rapture in action." Always united with the good God her inner joy radiated outwards.



The Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort were trained as religious under the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. They received the Notre Dame de Namur rule as a guide for their spiritual life. The Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort then trained the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld in this same rule of St. Julie.

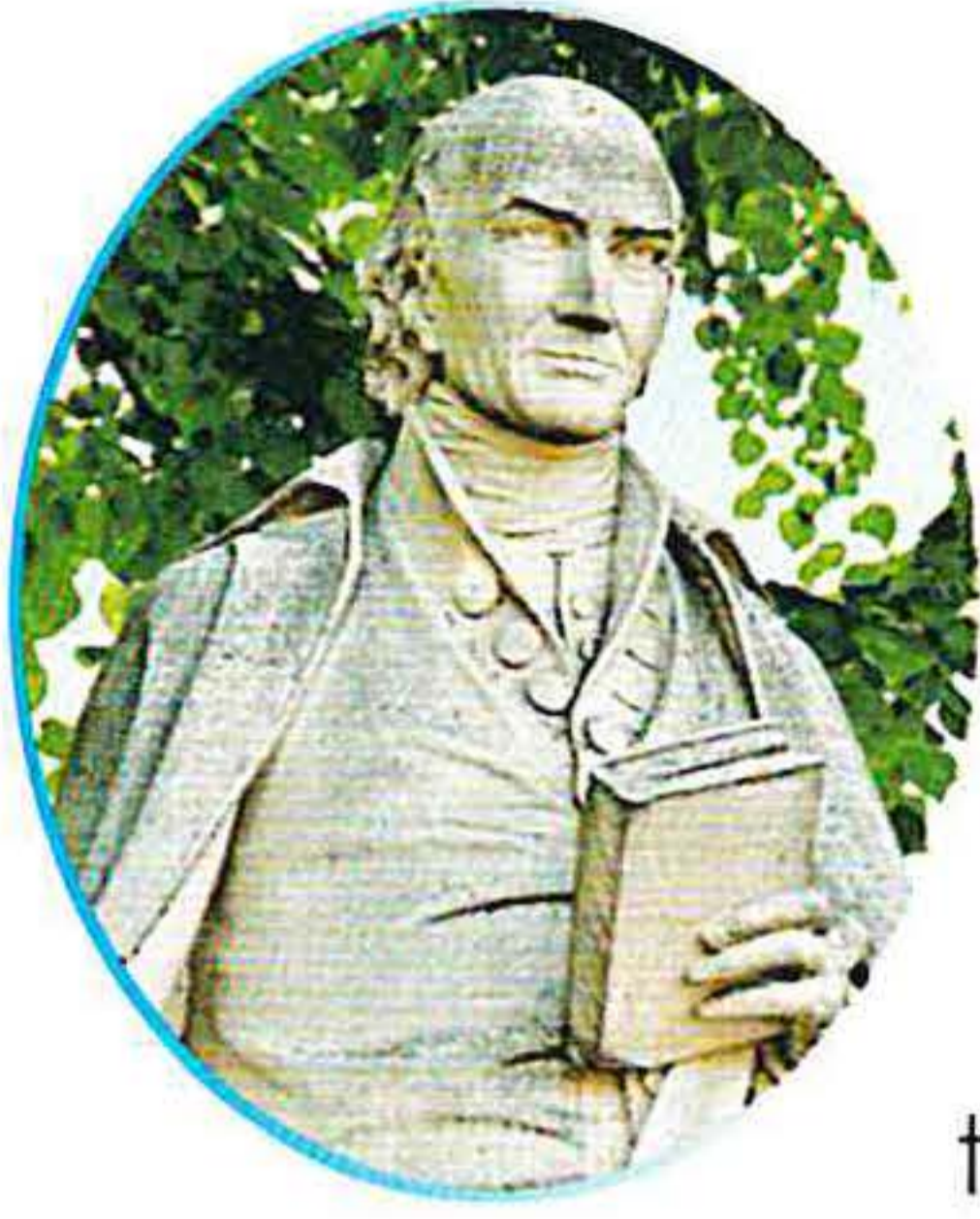
... It was not until 1884 upon meeting the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur from Reading, Ohio, while on visitation in Covington that Mother Maria Chrysostoma upon comparing the rule of Namur with the rule of Coesfeld realized the Coesfeld rule was almost identical to the Namur rule.

The third miracle for the canonization of St. Julie occurred exactly on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Coesfeld Congregation, October 1, 1950. This miracle which occurred in Campos Novos, Brazil, was through the instrumentality of two Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld from the province of Passo Fundo. St. Julie was smiling down on her daughters and giving them a sign that her work was indeed continuing through them.

• ADDENDUM •

BERNARD OVERBERG

(1754-1826) Educator of Educators



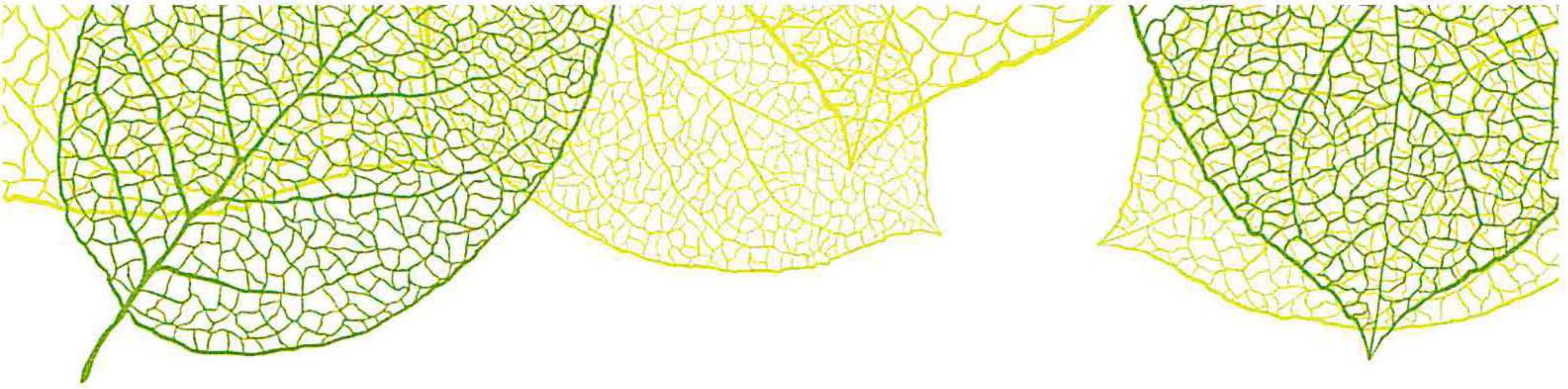
* The Catechesis

In 1804 Overberg published two catechisms, one for younger children and one for older students and adults. At the same time he published an accompanying handbook or manual to assist catechists or others who were trying to deepen their own faith. Overberg's catechism remained the official one for the Diocese of Münster until 1887...

Hilligonde Wolbring had an exposure to the Overberg tradition beyond what ordinarily came through school and parish. From age seven to fourteen she lived in the Bocholt home of Hermann Hüsener, a deeply religious man who became her good friend and counselor (she would later call him her "foster father"). Trained as a teacher by those whom Overberg himself had formed, Mr. Hüsener had completely absorbed Overberg's way of opening a child's heart to God.

The purpose of Overberg's catechism was not like that of many others before his time and after, namely, to give young people short, accurate doctrinal statements to memorize. Rather Overberg's catechesis organized and presented the Church's faith teaching and moral teaching in such a way as to lead the child or adult into a deep relationship with God. The truth of God was to touch both the mind and the heart, calling forth reflection, prayer, active response, and a profound centeredness on God.

A simple listing of the basic content of Overberg's catechism (the attributes of God; salvation history; the Christian life, the commandments; the sacraments; etc.) does not provide an adequate idea of what he was actually conveying in his catechesis. For that it is necessary to look at the themes he kept coming back to and at his points of emphasis.



Just as in Overberg's personal spiritual life, love was the central reality that tied the elements of his catechetical teaching together. God is loving, provident Creator and Father who cares for us more than anyone else ever could and is more deserving of our love than any other. This loving God calls us into union with himself in time and eternity and to a responsible love for ourselves, for all other people, and for creation. It is in this relationship that we find the happiness that God wants for us.

There is a noticeable similarity between the themes of Overberg's catechesis and the themes that stand out in the life of Sister Maria Aloysia and that show up in the writings of the Coesfeld Congregation. One can point especially to the themes of God's providence, of "God alone," of simplicity of life, of compassionate and caring love for the sisters and for those in need. Either this similarity is a remarkable coincidence or Sister Maria Aloysia and the others really did learn something as they were growing up and in their teacher training and it stayed with them as Sisters of Notre Dame.

The idea of God and of our relationship with him that Overberg conveyed in his catechesis was related to the general religious culture of the Rhineland and Westphalia. The values of simplicity of life, of care for others, of trust in God's providence, of profound centeredness on God that he taught were part of a larger spiritual tradition in the Diocese of Münster. The sisters who entered the Congregation during the early years came from that diocese and looked upon it as their spiritual home, the place where the Congregation's roots lay. The bishops of Münster during those years tended to see the Congregation in the same way. Indeed, one of the last things Bishop Brinkmann ever said to Mother Maria Chrysostoma Heck was that she should greet the sisters in America for him and remind them that they are always children of the Diocese of Münster.



Sister Maria
Bernarda



The Pedagogy

From 1783 until the time of his death in 1826, Overberg annually taught a ten-week course in pedagogy for the teachers of the common schools. For years he tried without success to get government permission and funding for the creation of a two-year "seminary" for teachers. Finally his students and colleagues were able to provide such an institutional base for the continuation of his work, establishing the seminar (normal school) for men in 1826 and for women in 1832. Another teacher training institute on the Overberg model was opened in 1852 at the St. Annathal Convent of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Coesfeld. Here the attention given to the spiritual formation of the teachers, already a regular part of the program for the lay people, had the added dimension of preparing the students to carry on their teaching ministry as vowed religious.

The Overberg legacy was foundational at the Coesfeld "preparant" school (Präparandie in German). The education officials who helped Father Elting and Sister Maria Bernarda get it started and gain government accreditation and who subsequently conducted the supervisory visits had themselves been students and/or colleagues of Overberg.

The basic textbook in Coesfeld was Overberg's *Directives for Purposeful School-teaching*, the published version of his lecture notes. The teaching was done by Father Elting, Sister Maria Bernarda, Sister Maria Ignatia and some other sisters who had been trained at the women's seminar in Münster. The Coesfeld students, whether "preps," postulants, or novices, took the certification examination in Münster together with the women from the seminar there.

As with his catechesis, Overberg's pedagogy is not really understandable apart from the theology and spirituality that underlie it. This is a point well made and extensively documented by Gundolf Krämer, S.J. in his doctoral dissertation accepted in 2001 at the University of Bonn. Overberg sees God as loving

Creator always at work to bring creation to its best state and often exercising his providential care through human beings who, like parents or doctors, bear responsibility for others. This is where the work of teachers comes in, for they help people develop what Overberg called in his catechism "the noblest qualities and abilities of soul with which God has gifted us," namely, "understanding, free will, memory, self awareness, conscience, and thirst for happiness."

Overberg was preparing teachers to work not with a social or intellectual elite, but with ordinary, even poor, people. Yet his profound sense of the equal dignity of every human being as gifted by God and called to union with him led Overberg to take great pains to show teachers how they should help even peasant children learn to observe, to ask questions, and to think; to acquire a taste for good reading; to solve practical problems mathematically; to develop wholesome and caring relationships with family and neighbors; to be self-supporting and willing to help others become so; to make responsible moral choices; to engage in simple, from the heart mental prayer.

The core of this whole educative process was to be a holy love, the teacher's love for the children, the children's love for their teacher. This teacher-student relationship was the key element in making school a place where children wanted to be, where they could enjoy learning, where they could mature through a kind and character-forming discipline. Overberg's own early experiences as a child of incredibly poor teaching and of difficulty learning later gave him much insight into how and why children learn.

In the introductory lectures of his normal course, Overberg motivated his students by presenting to their minds a picture of the kind of adult a child would grow up to be if educated the right way. That adult would be *verständig*, which implies having the knowledge, understanding, thinking skills, life skills and basic good judgment necessary to function competently as a reasonably happy and responsible human being in family and society. That adult should also be *gottesfürchtig*. That means God-fearing in the sense of being God-centered, living one's life directed to God in faith and influencing others for good.

• ADDENDUM •

FATHER THEODOR ELTING

Assistant Pastor of St. Lamberti Parish, Coesfeld

First Director of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld



Father Theodor Elting became Associate Pastor of St. Lamberti Parish in Coesfeld in 1847.

He was a young zealous priest with a great love for the poor. He was active in the diocese promoting educational, social and health care ministries. He was a gifted preacher and Bishop Müller relied on him to conduct parish missions.

When he came to know the intention of Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling to provide a home for poor orphaned children, he saw the potential for a work of charity that would need to be continued over time. He suggested to them that they consider establishing a religious convent in Coesfeld. He spoke to Bishop Müller about this project and found much support. After the young women discerned that they would be open to a religious vocation he was charged with finding the proper congregation to train them.

Father Elting assisted the foundation in Coesfeld in every way possible. He became the first director and held this position from 1852 until his death in 1862. Often he raised funds to help the sisters and their works taking fatherly care of the sisters and their charges.

• ADDENDUM •

BISHOP JOHANN

GEORG MÜLLER



Bishop Müller was Bishop of Münster from 1847-1870.

He was very open to religious congregations assuming ministries of service in his diocese. He delegated Father Theodor Elting to assist Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling in beginning a religious foundation in Coesfeld.

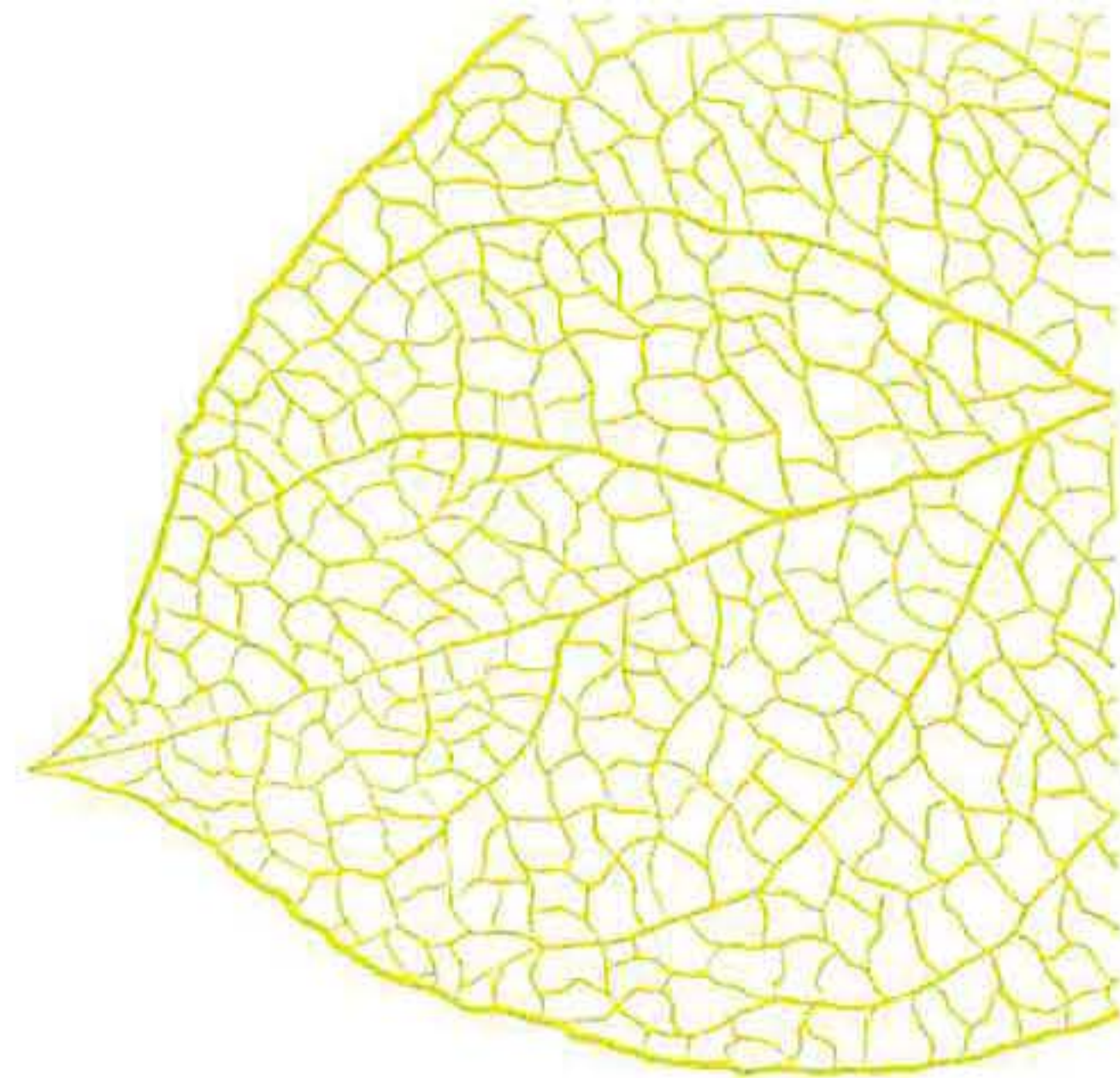
Bishop Müller allowed the purchase of St. Annathal convent and asked the nobility of Westphalia to support this worthy project. All transactions requiring government approvals carried his signature. For example the opening of the preparant school in St. Annathal and arrangements for candidates so they could take their teaching exam at the Royal Teacher Training College in Münster.

Bishop Müller gave the Congregation canonical recognition through the Charter of Foundation (1853). He also proclaimed St. Annathal as Motherhouse of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld after the separation from Amersfoort.



• ADDENDUM •

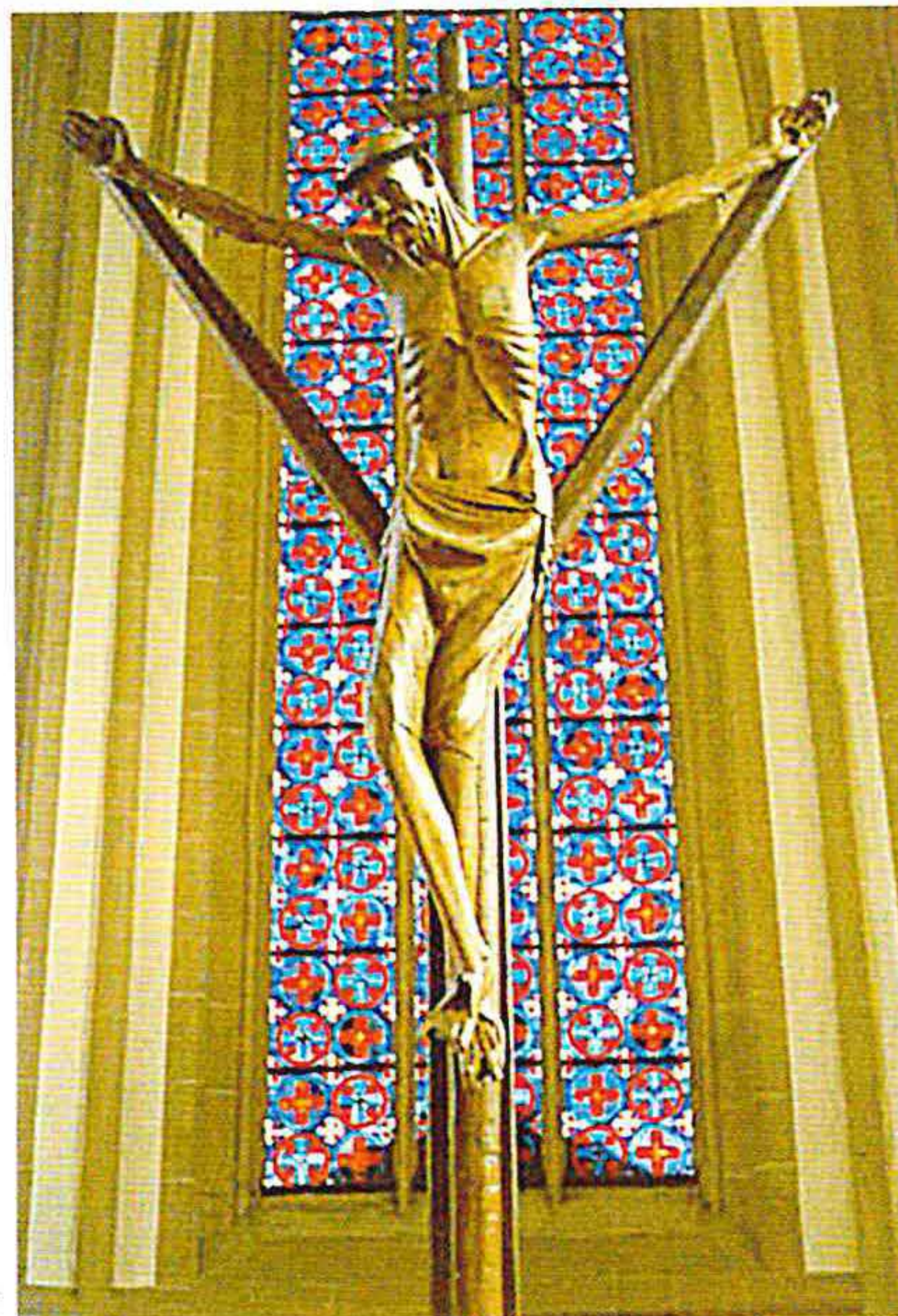
VICAR GENERAL
PAUL MELCHERS



Vicar General Paul Melchers who later became Bishop of Osnabrück and then Cologne was very involved in the beginning days of Notre Dame in Coesfeld. He was instrumental in helping the Sisters purchase St. Annathal by putting up all his possessions as security for the property.

He directed the retreat of Hilligonde and Elisabeth before their investment on October 1, 1850. He was Father Elting's seminary professor and he was spiritual director to Mother Maria Anna and recommended that she enter the Sisters of Notre Dame in Coesfeld.

As Vicar General, he was in the midst of conversations between Bishop Müller and Mother Marie Joseph of Amersfoort especially just before the separation of the two congregations.



The Coesfeld Crucifix

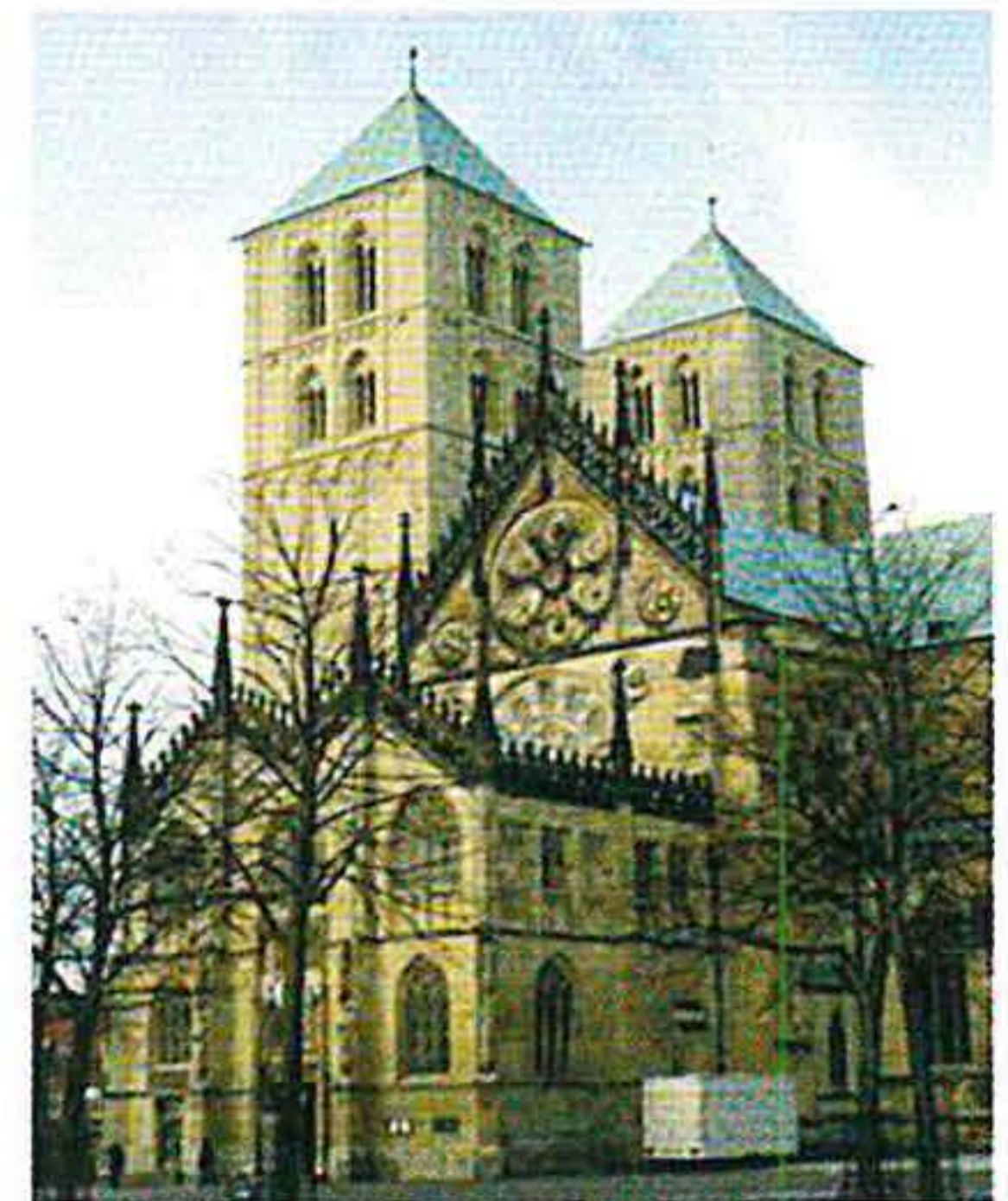
THE CIRCLE OF MÜNSTER



The Circle of Münster was a group of Catholic intellectuals composed of laity and clergy who met on a regular basis in Münster to discuss matters of higher religious education.

Bernard Overberg was a member of this group. They promoted a method of education that focused on the student, and making education enjoyable by drawing the student into the learning experience. They also emphasized creation and learning through the created world to come to know God, his will and his mission. Many of their ideas were based on those of Rousseau.

This group greatly influenced education and religious thought in Westphalia. They promoted a Catholic response to the needs of the times. In other words Catholic social action. The religious and educational climate they brought about in Münster inspired the founding of a number of teaching congregations in the 19th century in the Westphalia area.



Cathedral in Münster



United Kingdom

United States

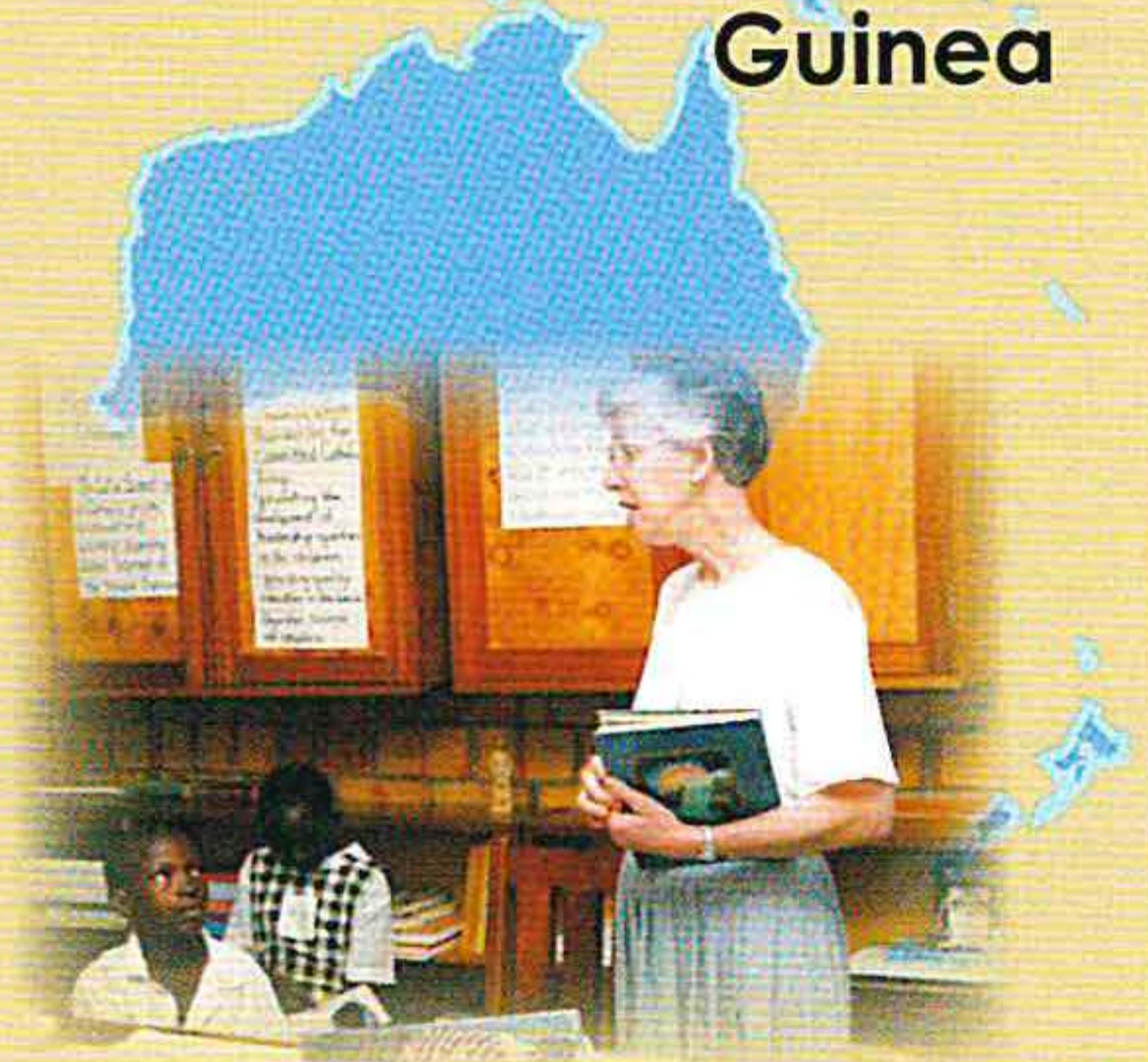
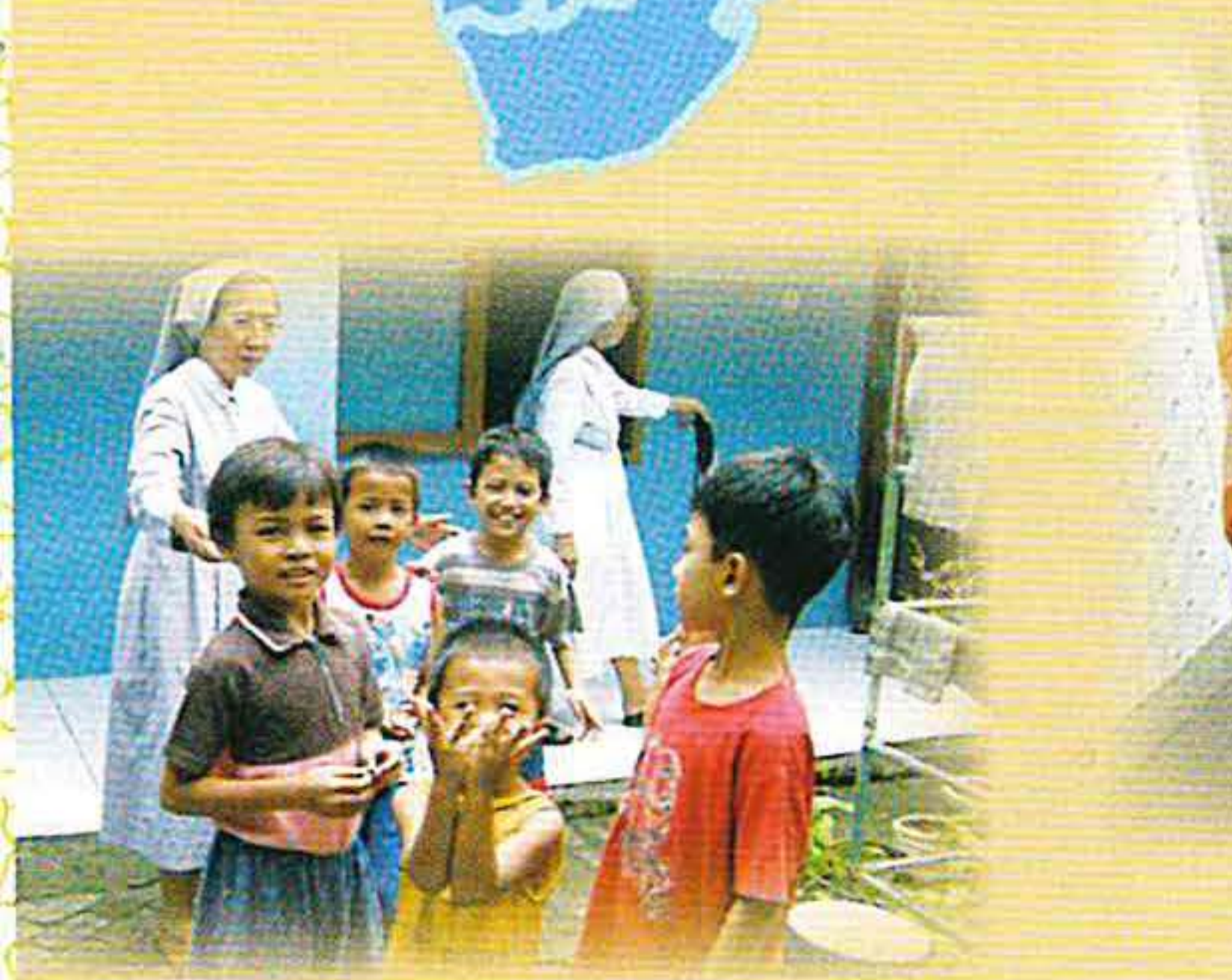
Nicaragua

Peru

Brazil



Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame in the World





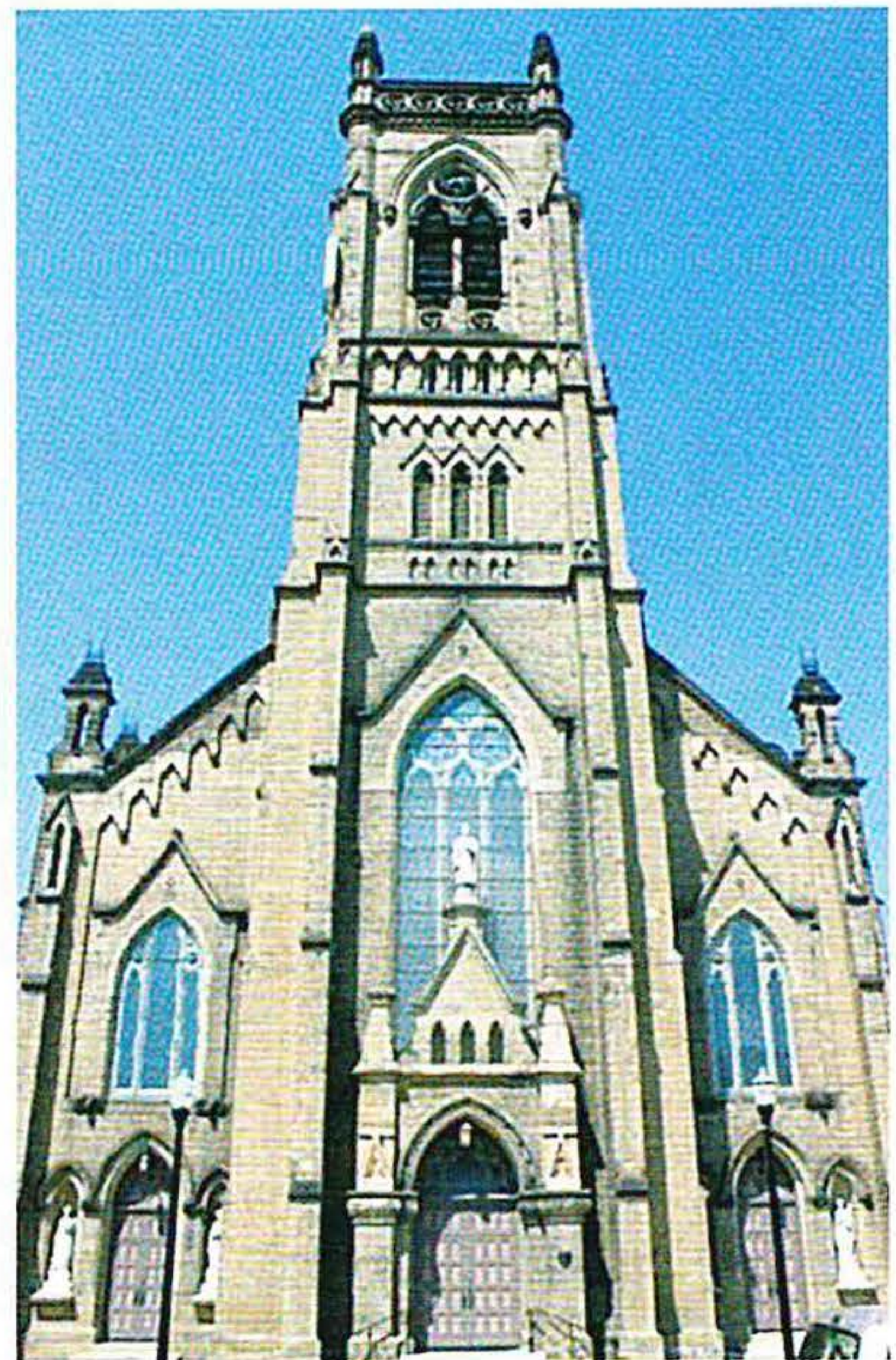


*Mother of God Church,
Covington, US*

The first
three parishes
in the
United States
where
the sisters were
missioned



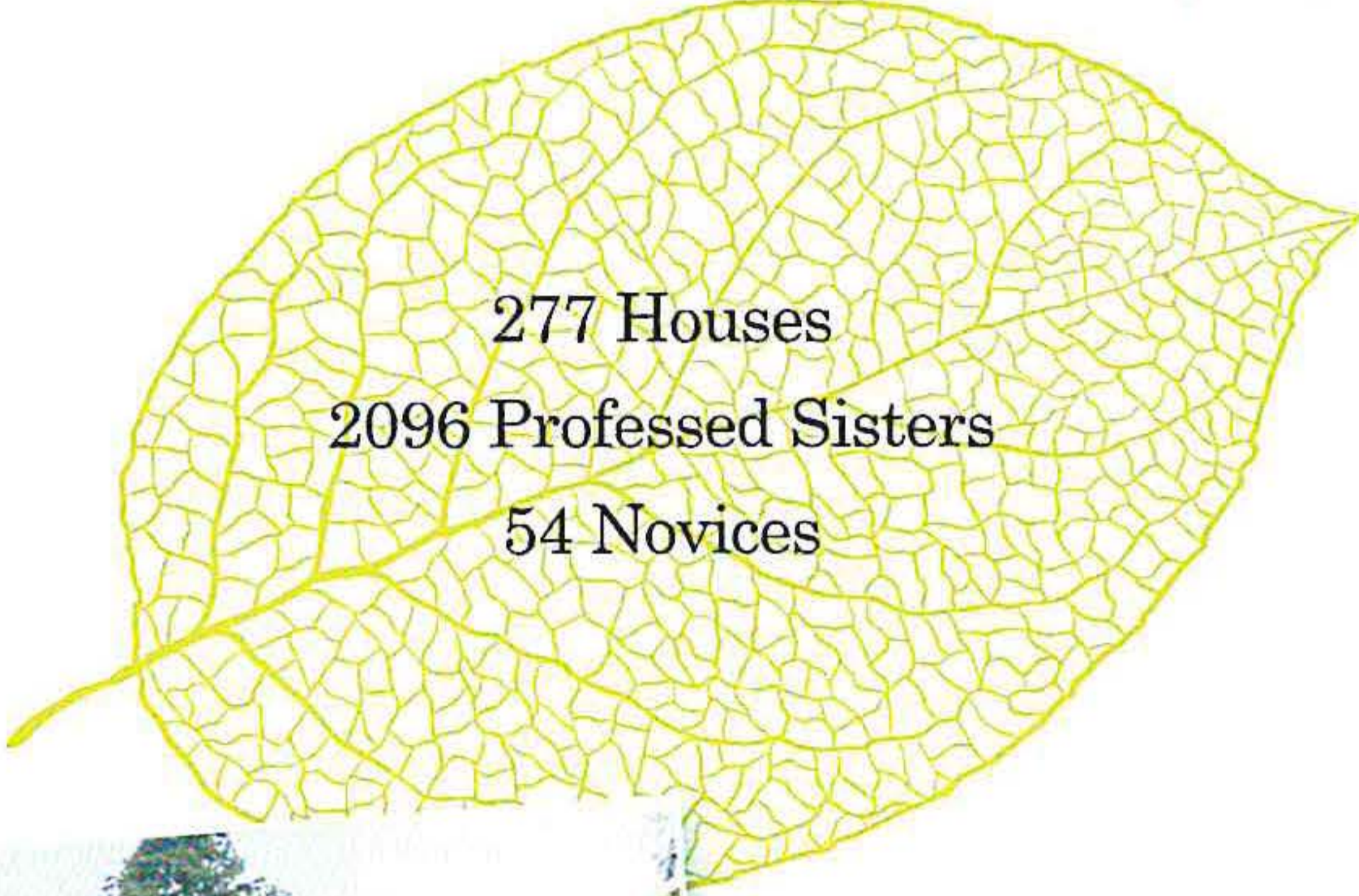
*St. Peter Church,
Cleveland, US*



*St. Stephan Church,
Cleveland, US*



Motherhouse and Generalate



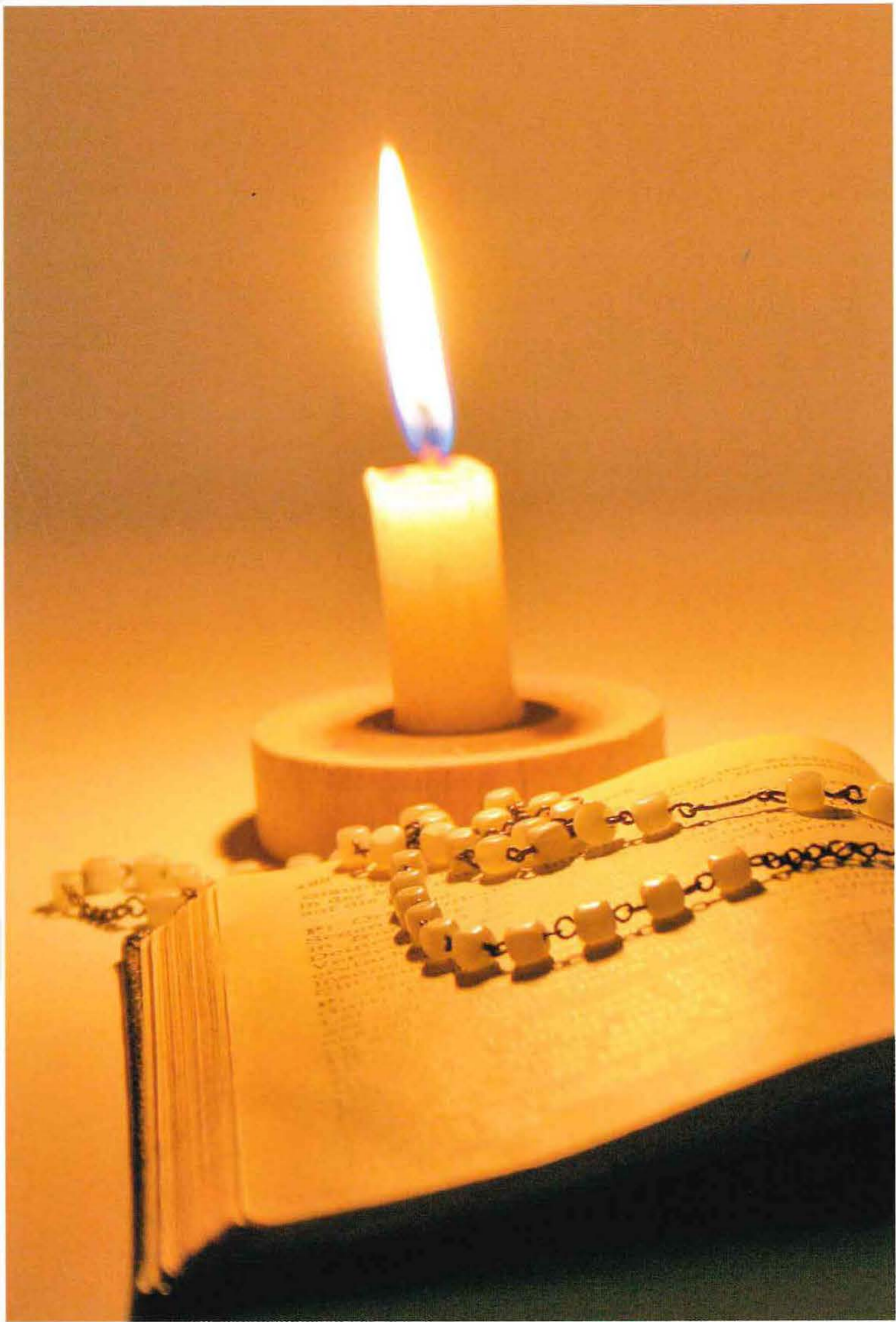
277 Houses
2096 Professed Sisters
54 Novices



Via della Camilluccia 687

00135 Roma

<http://snd1.org>





SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME