The Spirit of the First Sisters Lived in Her

Mother Gertrude Gerretsen lived through the years that the congregation was being formed. Even as the general superior, she was never one to be in the spotlight; she was said to have been overshadowed by the memory of Mother Mary Joseph Walker. Nevertheless she was a major contributor to building the sturdiness of the fledgling community. Amidst the difficult years following the Civil War, she oversaw significant growth in members and missions, always guiding with a steady hand.

Born in Prussia in 1839, Johanna Gerretsen later immigrated with her family to the United States. She lived in Buffalo until she entered the IHMs on April 16, 1858, and professed vows on Aug. 15, 1859.

Gertrude both witnessed and influenced the evolving congregation. She knew the co-founder, Mother Theresa Maxis, as well as Mother Mary Joseph Walker, her successor, and Monsignor Edward Joos. She was a novice during the summer of 1859 when the community separated into Pennsylvania and Monroe groups. She became the general superior on Jan. 3, 1865, at the age of 25 and served in that role until August 1869 when she resigned due to ill health. During her years in office, from 1865 to 1869, IHM opened eight schools and reopened two others; 48 sisters were on the missions, and the schools showed an enrollment of 2,270. With the 135 students at schools connected with the Motherhouse, some 2,400 children were receiving an IHM education.

Always mindful of the missionary spirit and the foreign missions, it was Gertrude, as general superior, who established the Association of the Holy Childhood in all IHM schools. She was the one who “so zealously gave the impetus to the missionary endeavor that flourishes with us today.”

The effects of the separation of the sisters in Pennsylvania and Monroe and the refusal of the Detroit bishop to allow Mother Theresa to return to the Monroe IHMs caused Gertrude much angst. She recalled the time in October 1868 when Sisters Theresa Maxis and Celestine Renauld came from Ottawa to meet Detroit Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere and seek his permission to return to the Monroe IHMs and she showed them through the new buildings and grounds. Lefevere allowed Celestine to come back, but not Theresa. She returned to Monroe for one night before Gertrude put her on a train to Detroit where she would stay overnight at Saint Joseph Convent with her identity kept from the sisters before setting out for the east. Gertrude, reflecting on those hours, often said, “They marked the hardest act of obedience she was ever called upon to perform during her life.”

After spending 18 years on the missions, she returned to the Motherhouse in 1888 where she was in charge of buildings and grounds. St. Mary College and Academy, published in 1932 for the dedication of the new Motherhouse and Academy says this about Mother Gertrude.

She... had a wide knowledge of botany. She loved flowers, and held, in common with St. Francis Assisi, a reverence for all the little creatures of the wood. For years the garden and park were under her supervision. There you could always find her. On summer evenings, as she passed through the garden, or sat on her favorite bench near the Chapel, the young sisters often caught her in reminiscent mood and coaxed from her stories of early struggles, of sorrows, of disappointments, all recompensed by the abiding peace and joy found in the service of Him....

She was one of the first IHMs to live to celebrate her golden jubilee in 1909. She died April 9, 1916. The text of her Menology concludes:

Those who were at the convent when she died, well remember how Mother Mechtildis, then Superior, sobbed over her coffin. “I have never had to fear for the fervor of the Community,” she said, “while Sister Gertrude was alive. The spirit of the first Sisters lived in her.”

The 22nd member to enter the congregation, during her 58 years as an IHM Gertrude contributed in many ways to shaping the congregation into what it has become.
Artifacts from Mother Gertrude’s Files

The holy card on the left is from Mother Gertrude’s Office Book. On the back is written “From Mother Theresa, Oct. 1883.” This is noteworthy because Mother Theresa Maxis did not return to Pennsylvania from the Ottawa convent of the Grey Nuns until January 1885.

Mother Gertrude was one of the first sisters in the community to celebrate a golden jubilee – 50 years as an IHM. The card to the right commemorates the event in the summer of 1909.

The Monroe Record account of Aug. 19, 1909, was long and detailed. Its final paragraph reminds us of our jubilees today.

A pleasing feature of this occasion was the presence of all the sisters as they are still assembled for their summer vacation. In the evening they tendered a formal reception...by addresses, song, and orchestral music the sisters endeavored to prove their affectionate regard...to make this day of Golden Jubilee bright with happy memories, a golden link to bind past and present....

Practice Makes Perfect—Sometimes

Sister Mary Jane (Marie Mark) Hinks taught early elementary students at St. Coleman in Pompano Beach, Fla., from 1985-2003. One of the important tasks for teachers of second graders in Catholic schools was to prepare them for First Communion. This included all the rubrics connected with attending liturgies.

Mary Jane’s class was to assume some responsibilities related to a Mass in the parish church such as, participating in the offertory procession and presenting the gifts of bread and wine to the priest. Since these were inexperienced, young students Mary Jane spent a good deal of time getting them ready. Three children were chosen. At the assigned time they were to leave their seats near the front of the church and go to the back where a small table held a dish with bread hosts and water and wine cruets to be used in the liturgy. Each child was to pick up one item, process up the center aisle and present it to the priest waiting in the front before the whole congregation. The practices went well. But, then, the actual day arrived.

At the prescribed time, the three children dutifully arose from their pews and walked reverently to the rear of the church. Mary Jane had taught the other children not to be looking around in church, but to focus their attention on the altar in the front. That’s what they were doing when they heard some of the parents seated in the back calling out in loud whispers to the three processors. Mary Jane knew something had gone awry, but it was too late to do anything. Coming up the aisle first was a child carrying the small bread dish and another the two cruets. About the same time she heard a lot of snickering from the other children in their pews. Behind the first two processors was the third child. He was carrying the small table that had held the items. The little boy made the presentation of the table to the priest, who just said, “Put it over there,” nodding to the side.

On the way back to his seat, he stopped at Mary Jane’s place and asked, “Did I do okay, Sister?” “Yes, you did great!” she reassured. “Now, get in your pew.”

The little boy followed her instructions and explained later that when one person picked up the bread dish and another the two cruets, he figured the only thing left was the table. So, he picked it up.

As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. But, then, nothing works every time.