



# CATHOLIC

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THE EARLY YEARS IN COLUMBUS  
OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR\*  
By Sister Vincent Feth, S.N.D. de N.

The Arrival of the Sisters

August 27, 1855, Sister Louise and the four Sisters, Sister Mary Augusta (Baustert), Sister Gonzaga (VanAschen), Sister Kostka (Dechan), and Sister Mary Agnes (Schumacher), who were to make the foundation at Columbus, left Cincinnati on the ten o'clock train. They arrived in Columbus at half past two (1) where they were greeted by a group of little girls from Saint Patrick and Holy Cross who had come to High Street to watch their arrival (2). A woman of Saint Patrick parish showed them to the carriages for the ride to the new convent. They probably moved along Naghten Street, the northern boundary of the city, and perhaps they caught a passing view through the tree-lined street of the red brick of Saint Patrick Church. They were received by Father Meagher at the rectory and served a dinner prepared by some ladies of the parish.

Near four o'clock, they left the rectory and went to their convent - "au fameux coucent de Columbus" wrote Sister Louise to the Mother General the next week. The house, situated just east of Washington Avenue, was so secluded that "one would think we were in the open country." (3) Still, it was close enough to Broad Street to offer a good view of the corduroyed expanse of that road. The grounds of the Insane Asylum, a four-story building, were immediately to the east.

The convent "contained eight chairs, half worn out, and two tables, the stove with its pots, and a cupboard in the kitchen to put all the rest." (4) Sister Louise paid fifteen dollars to the former owner for this poor lot of furniture. (5)

Sister Louise was certainly aware that other Notre Dame foundations had begun in similar poverty, but evidence of disappointed expectations is apparent in the comment to be found in the Annals: "The Reverend Father had formed many kind projects for the welfare of the religious which, however, he was unable to put into execution." (6)

Fortunately, the Sisters' beds and luggage had been sent before from Cincinnati; so, late in the afternoon of the day of their arrival, the Sisters set up the beds and unpacked their trunks. A statue of the Blessed Virgin was

devoutly placed on the mantelpiece. Then Sister Mary Agnes, the cook, began to be concerned about supper, for she found no food in the kitchen. However, someone soon brought three loaves of bread and the Sisters dug up one of the potato plants Sister Louise had noticed growing in the garden. Then a little girl brought them some milk, and so they had a supper "fit for queens." It began to grow dark, and they had no candles; so they sent a German girl to find one, as well as some holy water.

The next day the good Catholic people, who were "beside themselves with joy at having Sisters," (7) brought various provisions of food to stock the empty little kitchen. But the parlor remained without furniture; when someone came, a chair was brought from the refectory. Sister Mary Augusta, the superior, was told to continue this practice until someone would be inspired to donate some furniture. One of the four small rooms downstairs was fitted up as a chapel. A Mr. Collins gave a small altar and Bishop Purcell gave the altar stone and a chalice.

After staying with the little community for a few days, and promising to send them an old chest of drawers filled with necessary things, Sister Louise returned to Cincinnati. The two professed Sisters and two novices gave "promise of forming a very happy and very fervent community," (8) as they prepared to open classes at Saint Patrick the following Monday, September 3.

That no German Sisters had come to teach at Holy Cross displeased Father Borgess and he expressed his feelings to Sister Mary Augusta in plain terms. Her courteous manner and her loyalty in attempting to explain her superior's actions impressed him. Sister Mary Augusta, who spoke German well, then arranged with Sister Louise to go to Holy Cross herself later in the school year when a German Sister could be sent from Cincinnati as her companion. When Borgess was informed of this plan he was satisfied. For a time he was extra-ordinary confessor to the community, and always their good friend. After he left Holy Cross in 1859, and later when he became bishop of Detroit, he paid them several visits. (9)

#### The Opening of Classes at Saint Patrick School

School opened at Saint Patrick after the parish Mass at 7:30 A.M. Father Meagher conducted the Sisters to the second floor of the new red brick school (the boys were in classes on the first floor) where some eighty girls were waiting in the two classrooms. Meagher spoke to the children on their duty toward the zealous Sisters and then, turning to Sister Mary Augusta, said, "Sister Superior, now I turn them over to you. Mold and train them into good, useful, Christian women." (10)

The girls of the two upper classes, ranging upward from ten in age, hung their sunbonnets on the cloakrack in the corner of the west classroom and seated themselves at the direction of their teacher, Sister Gonzaga. Meanwhile, in the other classroom, Sister Kostka, probably with the help of Sister Mary Augusta, bowed fond parents out the door; and, having detached small hands from her habit, proceeded to place the little girls according to their standing in the first and second readers, their ability to spell, to compute and to recite the Catechism. Those who could do none of these things were placed in the "a b c" class. (11)

The children were told that class would begin at eight o'clock in the

morning after Mass, at which they were expected to be present. Morning dismissal would be at 11:30. There was to be no recess. Afternoon classes would begin at one o'clock and end at four. Each day from 1:00 P. M. to 2:00 P.M. and all afternoon on Friday there would be lessons in plain and fancy sewing. In addition, reading, Bible history, catechism, dictionary, grammar, composition, mental and practical arithmetic and geography were to be taught. After the children were given a list of books and articles required for study, they were dismissed for that day. So began the work of the religious teachers in Columbus. (12)

### The Price of Beginnings

The Sisters walked the long way back to their convent over muddy ways that could scarcely be called streets. (13) None of the area about Saint Patrick's was developed yet. Long Street to Naghten was a good slice of bog. There was a spring of pure water flowing undisturbed near the church on Grant Avenue, and the area between Cleveland Avenue and Washington Avenue abounded in pasture land and tracts of weeds. (14) The Sisters were to find that the faster they walked, the less deeply they sank in the mud.

September 13 was the first day the Sisters had the joy of having the Blessed Sacrament in their own chapel. It was to their Lord here that they came to have special recourse in the many needs which their extreme poverty gave them. The enthusiastic Sister Mary Augusta composed a special litany of expressions of gratitude and petitions for necessities, which she recited with the community every day. (15) One evening, when the Sisters returned from school, Sister Mary Agnes met them to say there was no wood with which to cook supper. There was also no money to buy any, so the Sisters went for their usual visit to chapel and Sister Mary Augusta led them in thanking God for the wood He was about to send. Then she added, in her characteristic way: "We love you, Lord, whether we have wood or not." (16) As the Sisters left the chapel, they heard the trotting of horses feet, the rattling of chains and a loud knock. When the door was opened, a man said, "Sister, Mr. Leonard sends you a load of wood." (17)

Not all their prayers were answered like that. Sometimes they received only courage to be content with a monotonous diet of potatoes, (18) and an occasional head of cabbage, or just a hope for carrots. (19) Prayer inspired them to search various spots in the open fields around the convent for firewood. How much they suffered from the lack of sufficient food or fuel we do not know, but it does not make the picture any brighter to learn that during their first winter in Columbus, the weather was the most severe recorded in twenty-five years. January had records of 15 to 20 below zero and February, 27 to 19 degrees below zero. The Sisters had their long trudge back and forth to school every day in this weather. They could easily sympathize with the children who came from even greater distances. Sister Mary Augusta gathered the smaller ones around the wood stove in the middle of the classroom, rubbing their numb little fingers, and saying, "Heat and cold bless the Lord." (21)

The precarious financial situation of the Sisters stemmed from their method of support. Each student was to pay fifty cents a month, except those whose mothers were members of the Society for Catholic Schools; these were to pay twenty-five cents. The poor, who were many, were received free of charge. (22) On the delinquents Sister Mary Augusta brought no pressure for fear of losing them from the Catholic school. However, she devised ingenious ways to provide food for the Sisters. At Christmas time she composed a play and encouraged

those who were shepherds not to come empty-handed to adore the Infant Jesus. She suggested to one to bring potatoes, another a basket of eggs, a third a crock of butter. In this way, provisions for several weeks were obtained.

At another time, some few children brought apples to school for their teacher. Sister Mary Augusta told the Sisters to ask the children who had brought apples to hold them up, for she was to go around gathering the fruit. Soon the pupils vied with one another to see who would bring the finest apple. So a good store of apples was laid up. (23)

In October the furniture situation in the parlor was somewhat improved when a Mrs. Riches donated six chairs. Sister Mary Augusta said the Sisters hardly dared sit on them for fear of wearing them out. (24) This gift was made after Bishop Joseph Young of Erie, Pennsylvania, came to say Mass. He was a former pastor at Holy Cross and, returning for a visit to Columbus, Borgess arranged for him to offer Mass at the Sisters' convent. Bishop Young observed the obvious poverty of the furnishings and was, therefore, not surprised to learn that the Sisters had no wine for Mass in the house. Father Meagher had promised the evening before to send some the first thing in the morning, but it had not yet arrived. The kindly bishop confidently began Mass anyway. When he reached the Offertory and there was still no wine, the good bishop turned to the little congregation of four Sisters kneeling on the floor (they had no prie-dieux) and delivered a short sermon on holy poverty and the providence of God. He spoke until the wine arrived from Meagher and then continued the Holy Sacrifice. (25)

On October 22, Sister Mary Augusta wrote to Namur, giving an account of the Columbus foundation. In addition to the interesting details of the Sisters' activities, the letter reveals the supernatural outlook of the superior; she omits any mention of the mission's poverty.

My very dear Mother,

Your lambs of Columbus are rejoicing in the thought that they will soon receive a letter written in your own hand. Thanks be to God, we are still all in good health and able to continue our dear little Mission. We are truly like four little grains of wheat thrown into the ground of Jehovah, and He alone must cause them to yield in His own time. Truly, there is much to do here for our good Master; but we must go slowly so as not to arouse the poor Protestants. They feel sorry for us, they say that we are mad to shut ourselves up thus. The other day, a lady said, "If at least they would remove those headbands, they would seem more agreeable." Poor people, I pity them, in my turn! (26)

Last Sunday, I gave an instruction for the first time to women who are members of the living Rosary [Sodality]. While hearing the Blessed Virgin spoken of, tears were flowing from their eyes; I assure you that in my turn, I also had much consolation. Many among them placed themselves on the steps of the platform so as to hear me better. There were only about thirty because it was raining very hard. (27) I said to them: "Allow me to say, my good ladies, not to allow a single day to pass without saying your decade of the Rosary, then the Blessed Virgin will never abandon you: she will be near you at the hour of death." With the simplicity of children, they all answered, "Yes, Sister." Oh, how beautiful is our vocation! Thank you, thank you, my very dear Mother, for having taken me in to the number of your children! Oh! if I had a thousand lives, I

would sacrifice them voluntarily for the glory of Him who has given His life for His sheep!

It is four o'clock in the morning that I am writing to you (the Sisters are washing) (28) not having enough free time; I am in class all day; they bring us dinner there. . . . The Sisters here are all so nice, it is a pity that they are not better instructed. (29) Sister Mary Agnes, who is the cook, is the best child that I have every seen; she is admirably obedient; one can see that she is continually recollected. Sister Kostka teaches the little class; Sister Gonzaga is remaining for awhile.....

On October 30, Sister Gonzaga returned to Cincinnati. Because of the distances at which the children lived, and the poor roads, her classes had grown smaller as autumn progressed. Sister Mary Augusta was able to take over Sister Gonzaga's classes in addition to her regular duties. (30)

The little community, therefore, was reduced to the superior, one professed Sister, and one novice. On December 8 the three of them had exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, which meant, simply that the tabernacle was left open all day. There were other feast days and Sundays when there was no Benediction; nevertheless, they sang Vespers and the Benediction hymns. During Holy Week, in spite of the fact that there were only three Sisters, they had "two grand processions." They also had all-night adoration before the repository, with the Sisters replacing one another. In all, each had over twelve hours of adoration. (31)

#### First Holy Communion at Saint Patrick's

Easter came early that first year of the Sisters' work in Columbus, and on Low Sunday, March 30, thirty girls at Saint Patrick's received Holy Communion at the ten o'clock Mass. They had been carefully prepared, having received for some time an extra hour's instruction each day, even Saturdays. During Holy Week they had passed their examination; they spent the last three days of Easter Week in retreat. It is safe to say that most of this preparation fell to Sister Mary Augusta. Everything was done to add solemnity to the occasion. Two gentlemen escorted the white-veiled girls from the school gate to their places in the sanctuary. During Mass, the first communicants solemnly renewed their baptismal promises before Communion. After Vespers the girls were enrolled in the Scapular. (32)

#### The Opening of Classes at Holy Cross School

That April two more Sisters joined the community: Sister Louisa (Elshoff), assigned to teach at the German school at Holy Cross with Sister Mary Augusta, and Sister Aloysia (Kennedy), who would replace the superior at Saint Patrick's. The exact date of the taking over of classes at Holy Cross is not given. The Annals say "after Easter." (33)

At Holy Cross the Sisters taught well over fifty girls. As early as 1850, Father Borgess had reported to his archbishop that there were over 125 children in the German school. (34) A layman continued to teach the boys (35) until the next September when the Brothers of the Holy Cross came from South Bend. (36) There were probably only two classrooms at this time since the old church measured but fifty feet long and thirty-five feet wide. In the summer of 1857 the building was enlarged by a twenty-foot extension and a second floor. This

gave the pupils of the German school four large classrooms. (37)

#### The Sisters' First Change of Residence

On May 4, 1856, the Sisters moved from the little cottage to a larger frame house on the west side of Cleveland Avenue, to the north of the present Long Street. They were now only three blocks from Saint Patrick's, though the distance to Holy Cross was not lessened. The new house had more ample grounds and space to raise vegetables and flowers, and Sister Louisa often worked in the garden. She wore wooden shoes to save her leather ones, to the wonder of the townsfolk. (38)

#### Formal Closing at Saint Patrick School

When school came to a close that July, a public exhibition of work was held at Saint Patrick's. Apparently none was held at Holy Cross, perhaps since the Sisters had been there so short a time. Many specimens of work displayed around the wall won high praise and some of the embroidery work caught the eye of several non-Catholic ladies who wished to purchase it. A program consisting of a short drama, songs and hymns was presented. The honored guests occupied chairs on a carpeted platform. These guests included Fathers Meagher and Borgess, and the latter's mother and sister. When the program was over, Meagher addressed the assembly praising the work of the Sisters, and distributed premiums to deserving pupils. (39) So closed the first full year's work of education by the Sisters in Columbus.

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\* See "Bulletin" of March, 1980. This article is an excerpt from "A History of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Columbus, the First Fifty Years, 1855-1905," written by Sister Vincent Feth, S.N.D. de N.

(1) Letter of Sister Superior Louise to the Reverend Mother General at Namur, Sept. 8, 1855. Most of the account of the first day is taken from this.

(2) Annals, p. 6.

(3) Sister Louise to Mother General, Sept. 8, 1855. The exact position of this house is difficult to determine because the accounts vary slightly. The more reliable place is just east of Washington Ave. A map of Columbus of 1856 indicating brick and frame buildings, shows a frame dwelling in a position that agrees with these accounts. For practical purposes, the writer is assuming this is correct, and that the first convent of the Sisters in Columbus was located at the northeast corner of the present Hutton Place and Everett Alley. This is about one-half block east of the present Columbus Art Gallery on the first street north of Broad. A brick duplex now occupies the spot.

(4) Sister Louise to Mother General, Sept. 8, 1855.

(5) Annals, p. 5.

(6) Ibid., p. 4

(7) Sister Louise to Mother General, Sept. 8, 1855.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Annals, p. 7.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ellen McMahon, from an unpublished, unpaged Memoir written on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the arrival of the Sisters....She had been among the first pupils the Sisters taught at Saint Patrick School.

(12) Ibid.

(13) "Life of Sister Mary Augusta," Memoirs of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (printed privately for the use of the Sisters), III, 179.

(14) McMahon, Memoirs.

(15) "Life of Sister Mary Augusta," MSND, p. 178.

(16) Statement of Sister Mary Agnes in 1905 on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Columbus foundation.

(17) This was the Theodore Leonard who, according to the Annals, some years later offered Sister Superior Louise a large farm outside Columbus if she would erect there a boarding school. She had to decline. In 1865 the same property was accepted by the Dominican Sisters who had been burned out of Somerset. Thus originated Saint Mary of the Springs.

(18) A year earlier the situation could have been much worse. How well Providence took care of them is indicated in a brief article in the Daily Capital City Fact for Aug. 16, 1855. Potatoes, it is stated, had seemed to be growing scarcer and scarcer for ten years, after the potato disease first hit. "But this year they give promise of a sound and abundant yield."

(19) "Life of Sister Mary Augusta," MSND, p. 177.

(20) Alfred E. Lee, History of the City of Columbus (New York: Munsell and Co., 1892), IM 704, 705.

(21) Statement of Sister Mary Wilfrid, O.P., Feb. 1957, relative to the high regard her aunt, Ellen McMahon, had for Sister Mary Augusta's deep spirituality.

(22) Sister Louise to Mother General, Sept. 8, 1855.

(23) "Life of Sister Mary Augusta," MSND, p. 177

(24) Recollections of Sister Mary Augusta incorporated in the Annals. Unpaged notebook.

(25) Ibid.

(26) This reference to Protestants corroborates other evidence that there was no bigotry in Columbus. If the Protestants felt "sorry" for the Sisters, they could hardly have been bitter against them.

(27) She might have added, "And there are no pavements!"

(28) Rising early to do the washing at four o'clock was not unusual. Many convents had this arrangement since all the washing had to be done by hand and there were more hands available before the teachers left for their schools.

(29) It is not clear whether Sister Mary Augusta is here expressing her own chagrin at not being better able to guide and direct Sisters, or whether she is referring to a lack of earlier training on their part. Half the community, Sister Gonzage and Sister Kostka, were novices.

(30) Annals, p. 14.

(31) "Life of Sister Mary Augusta," MSND, p. 178.

(32) McMahon, Memoir.

(33) Annals, p. 14.

(34) Notre Dame University Archives, Borgess to Purcell, March 3, 1849.

(35) William E. Kappes, History of the First Catholics in Columbus and of Holy Cross Parish (Unpublished study, 1946), unpaged.

(36) Provincial Archives, Brothers of the Holy Cross, South Bend, Indiana.

(37) Lee, op. cit., II, 641.

(38) McMahon, Memoir.

(39) Ibid.

(To be continued)

MT. CALVARY CEMETERY BURIAL RECORDS  
(Continued)

1890 (Cont.)

Zang, Martin (33), Sept. 18  
 Kessler, Franz (40), Oct. 12  
 Schind, Emma Clara (3), Oct. 13  
 Kiefer, Joseph (9m.), Oct. 29  
 Brehl, Nicolaus (76), Nov. 3  
 Rusinger, Anna (18), Nov. 12  
 Straub, Maria (1m.), Nov. 16  
 Meder, Daniel (71), Dec. 3  
 Woelfel, Doreta (12), Dec. 12  
 Ryan, Thomas (51), Dec. 9  
 Reib, Maria Magdalena (3), Dec. 16  
 Rusinger, Joseph (1d.), Dec. 16  
 Hoffman, Heinrich (69), Dec. 18  
 Obert, Carl (1d.), Dec. 23

1891

Seveing, Wm (24), Jan. 1  
 Trott, Georg (-), Jan. 2  
 Neumaier, Maria (66), Jan. 7  
 Eckhart, Carl (65), Jan. 7  
 Hartung, Louis (40), Jan. 14  
 Brun, Katie (25), Jan. 14  
 Deibel, Martin (60), Jan. 20  
 Ehret, Wilhelmina (4), Jan. 23  
 Ims, Anna Margaretha (42), Jan. 27  
 Heimler, Johanna (5m.), Jan. 28  
 Woller, Joseph (14), Jan. 28  
 Schafhausen, Johana (77), Jan. 29  
 Fisher, Maria (4), Jan. 29  
 Abbard, Eliz. (1y.), Feb. 2  
 Oestreicher, Joseph (15), Feb. 3  
 Rutter, Barbara (71), Feb. 4  
 Bensheimer, Elonora (9), Feb. 10  
 Kleber, Wilhelm (16), Feb. 17  
 Hackbarth, Heinrich & Paul (2), Feb. 9  
 Zang, 2 children of Fred, March 5  
 Hirmer, Andreas (13), Feb. 16  
 Bruckhoven, Leo (1d.), March 17  
 Kaiser, Mary (1d.), March 9  
 Harris, Will A. (10d.), March 22  
 Burny, Robert (70), March 30  
 Koerbel, Anna (65), March 31  
 Beer, Marie (43), March 12  
 Hellenthal, Elizabeth (51), March 27  
 Baumbusch, Sebastian (74), April 23  
 Wegeman, Bernhart (17), April 28  
 Eierman, Rosa (10m.), April 22  
 Hauser, Raimund (4m.), April 9

Trott, Benedict (91), April 30  
 Mueller, Florentina (1y.), April 6  
 Weimer, Joseph (28), April 27  
 Remser, Albert (65), April 13  
 Schreck, John (60), April 1  
 Bruckhoven, Joseph (1m.), May 1  
 Turn, Anton (8), May 3  
 Lukhaupt, Adam (14), May 4  
 Hagerman, John Wilhelm (1y.), May 21  
 Vetter, Johannes (22), May 11  
 Colliton, Mary (15), May 23  
 Bruckhoven, Johannes Andreas (83), May 9  
 Shimel, Aloys Andreas (2), June 7  
 Rusinger, William (8), June 25  
 Herman, Coelestus (8), June 11  
 Kraus, Wilhelm (8m.), June 26  
 Stiebes, Franz Edward (9m.), July 11  
 Beckman, Alfred (50), July 18  
 Pиррung, Jakob (70), July 26  
 Gessner, Ida Barbara (3), July 24  
 Harrison, John Edward (2), July 23  
 Kleinbein, John (1d.), July 15  
 Ebner, Mathias (69), Aug. 1  
 Schmitt, Wilhelm (93), Aug. 1  
 Wagner, Franz (27d.), Aug. 1  
 Luft, Fidelius (50), Aug. 5  
 Debenetety, David (1y.), Aug. 21  
 Buergl, Edmund (40), Aug. 3  
 Bauman, Louisa (11m.), Aug. 23  
 Hellenthal, John (15), Aug. 13  
 Kaiser, John (14d.), Aug. 21  
 Schmidt, Herman (55), Aug. 12  
 Heinman, Eva (67), Sept. 22  
 Hoffstetter, Child of (1d.), Sept. 24  
 Ims, Jakob (-), Sept. 20  
 Albert, Adam (74), Sept. 3  
 Guettinger, Dominik (63), Sept. 27  
 Unversagt, Gottlieb (64), Sept. 22  
 Kelle, Stephan (55), Sept. 16  
 Straub, Catharina (10), Sept. 24  
 Tried, Fensia (15d.), Oct. --  
 Bramft, Wilhelm (5), Oct. 3  
 Wenger, Joseph (41), Oct. 3  
 Eckstein, Louis (28), Oct. 15  
 Dury, Rosa (38), Oct. 18  
 Deibel, Joseph G. (70), Oct. 14  
 Schwind, Aloys (5m.), Oct. 23  
 Grau, Georg (2m.), Oct. 8  
 Festner, Joseph (20), Oct. 16  
 Dury, Child of Alfred (1d.), Oct. 13  
 Grau, Elizabeth (1y.), Oct. 1

(To be continued)