

Chapter 41 – Mother Mary Augustine Geisel

A Pearl among Women¹

There are many examples of outstanding women, those whom Holy Writ calls “valiant” and who have “put their hands to strong things and opened their hands to the poor and needy”. From all parts of the world these examples have come and from all the ages of history up to our own times; so it may be said that Mother Mary Augustine Geisel was such a strong and valiant woman, but withal and kind and gracious one.

Frieda Geisel was born on 23rd February 1878 at Simprechtshausen in the county of Wuerttemberg. She belonged, therefore, to one of the Catholic parts of Germany, a district where the old patriarchal way of life which made the charm of the Germany of olden times still prevailed. Being intelligent, she made good studies, supplemented by four years and a half which she spent at Chartres, the ancient French city celebrated for its magnificent Cathedral. On her return home she decided to follow the teaching profession as her father had done and spent some time at the Franciscan Convent at Siessen near Ravensburg. Here it was that she found her way in life. Among the students at the college was a Dominican nun from Rhodesia, Sister M Canisia Fink. From her the young teacher heard many things of the still unknown far-off land of Africa where so much may be done for God and she was fired with the longing to devote herself to it.

A few years were to elapse, spent in teaching in her own land, before she could fulfil the desire of her heart and go as an aspirant to the recently-established Dominican Convent at Schlehdorf. It had been founded as a collecting centre for the missions, and never was an enterprise better justified by its results; for after Miss Geisel’s entrance a whole spate of vocations followed, though probably none left such a mark on the Congregation as she did.

On arriving in South Africa in 1904² and looking forward to pursue her career as a school teacher she was, however, told that a music teacher was urgently needed; and with her excellent foundation in music she was to prepare for the Licentiate Diploma. In obedience to the wish of her superiors, for the next eighteen years she taught music, first at the Mother House and then at Albany Street Convent, East London. Appointed Prioress of the latter house in 1923, she displayed such brilliant administrative and governing powers that the General Chapter of the Congregation elected her in 1928 to the position of Prioress General.

At the end of her first six years of office she was chosen for a second term, on the conclusion of which the Holy See, recognising her admirable fitness for a difficult and responsible position (during World War II), in response to postulation, permitted the prolongation of her government for yet another period. When there was danger of her many Sisters of German nationality being interned as aliens in South Africa during the War, she sought a personal interview with the Prime Minister, General JC Smuts, and obtained for her nuns exemption from the Provisions of the Aliens Registration Act of October 1939. By the privilege her Sisters were allowed to continue their apostolic work for the good of the country.

The life of a missionary Sister in South Africa is not one of dreamy repose at the best of times and Mother Augustine was driven by the strongest spur of all, a burning love of God and her neighbour. Her ideal virtue was “Mother Serving”³ as she wrote, “demands the protection and care of others even to the entire sacrifice of self. Always to be kind and to believe the good in others, even when everything looks wrong,

¹ *Although Mother Augustine Geisel does not belong to the group of first Sisters of the Congregation, her achievements were so outstanding that she deserves mention here. Cf. Biographical Sketch of Mother M Augustine Geisel P*

² *Sister Augustgine Geisel was received into the Order in 1905 and professed under Mother M Lucy Kaltenstadler at King William’s Town on 8th August 1906.*

³ *Muetterliches Dienen.*

or even when quite a lot is actually wrong...” And this and all it entails she would do for the welfare of others; that they may become fitter instruments in God’s Hands.

She worked for God, with His Mother as her model. But in all her difficulties of a practical nature she would have recourse to the Saint she called the “Superintendent General of the Institute”. St Joseph knew all about practical troubles, so she invoked his intercession in every perplexity and was never disappointed. Plenty of help was needed for she established 25 new convents⁴, devoted to many different kinds of work. One notable one was the great Institution for teaching the Deaf in Johannesburg. There too, as well as a school for backward children, she founded a Training College for African Woman Teachers. A vocational and secondary school for Coloured girls, orphanages and schools for African children, clinics and dispensaries for African patients, the nursing of the sick in hospitals and maternity homes were also works undertaken by the Sisters at her instance. Only a few days before her death the work was begun on the “Mater Dei” Private Hospital in East London which she had been planning for years. She also sent two Sisters to study Medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand – the first religious to qualify as medical practitioners in South Africa. Among the most remarkable of this Mother General’s achievements may be counted the establishment of the African Sisters’ Branch of the Institute, and certainly not the least, the final approbation by the Holy See of the congregation and its Constitution in 1938.⁵ All this entailed much travelling and, unlike her predecessor who rarely left King William’s Town, Mother Augustine crossed the ocean three times; a trial for one who was not a good sailor. With her wonted courage she did not hesitate to board the first mission plane in this country in order to reach a distant mission when roads were impassable in the rainy season. Twice she was carried across the swollen Kei River by Africans and more than once she crossed a river on horseback. Frequently she spent a night on the African veld when the bus or car at her disposal broke down.

But despite all this business and activity Mother Augustine was deeply spiritual. Anyone who chanced to intrude upon her solitude during prayer noticed that she was withdrawn from earthly things, in total communion with God. The tall, slight figure and ethereal expression gave her a transcendent aura that set her apart. To explain how this frail woman could endure the schedule she had set herself, one must go from physical elements to spiritual inspiration.

But old age was coming on her and, by August 1945, the Mother General’s health became a growing concern to all but herself, for self had never found a place in her vocabulary. She was too busy at the Christmas season attending to the needs of her Sisters, labouring for souls in distant missions to heed the remonstrances of those who saw that the zeal for God’s House was literally consuming her. A pain had begun to worry her but all she would do was to take some anodyne when it became acute, and go on with her work. Perhaps she saw better than others her need to obey the Master’s injunction to work while it was still day, for the night was at hand, when work would no longer be possible. On Christmas Eve Mother Augustine was utterly spent and it was obvious that she could not sing the Midnight Matins; but if

⁴ *In view of these many foundations she has been called “the second foundress of the Congregation”.*

⁵ *The work of drafting the new Constitution was entrusted to Mother M Alacoque Brien OP, M.A. In this undertaking she was assisted by Very Rev Father Louis Nolan OP and Rev Father Oswin Magrath OP. The work has been praised by the discerning as a masterpiece at the time. Molly Brien, born at Port Elizabeth in 1877, received her schooling at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, King William’s Town. From the very first she was distinguished among her contemporaries. In 1896 she entered “King” Convent and spent her early religious life as a teacher and mistress of boarders. She was, however, considered more successful as a lecturer than a teacher. In 1917 she went to Rhodes University College, Grahamstown, where she gained the King’s Gold Medal in Modern Languages. At the request of her Superiors she now devoted her logical mind and great store of knowledge to the needs of the Institute. In 1928 she was appointed a member of the General Council and from then on almost to the time of her death she was a driving force in the Congregation. Her last work was the “Suggestions for the formation of Provinces in the Institute”. The Provincial System was duly introduced. In South Africa the Houses in the Cape formed the Province of the Sacred Heart, while those foundations in the Free State and Transvaal constituted the Province of St Joseph. The Prioresses Provincial were Mother Carina Betzl and Mother Vedasta Erber respectively. However, at the General Chapter of 1959, the Provincial System was considered redundant in South Africa and there abrogated, although it remained in force in the Provinces abroad. The Convents in the Cape Province were then directed by a Vicarress who was responsible to the Prioress General. When the works of the Congregation were being retrenched in South Africa a Vicarress was no longer needed to help govern the Cape District.*

she gave in about that she begged for sung Vespers on the day. Here she once more filled the chapel with her splendid mezzo soprano. But it proved to be her swan-song for she never sang Office again.

In January 1946 she consented to see the doctors and for a week she was in the “Mater Dei” Nursing Home, East London, still writing letters most of the time. When asked how she felt, she said half in jest that the Sisters were not satisfied with her nor, she with them: “... They make me do what they want”. Finally the necessary surgery was performed and all seemed to be going well at first; but complications set in and the precious life could not be saved. Fortified by the rites of Holy Church and, supported by the prayers of many Sisters kneeling around her bed, she peacefully gave up her soul to God at 11 o’clock in the morning of the 24th January 1946.

As soon as the tidings of her death were spread abroad by radio, post and telegraph, touching tributes poured in from far and near. They all expressed grateful veneration for one who, like an apostle on the move, had gone about doing good by her work, her many letters, her words and the constant example of her beautiful and holy life. She left behind her more than eight hundred religious, to all of whom she had been a most loving mother, deeply solicitous for their welfare in every way, especially in their spiritual advancement.

For a while the coffin, covered with flowers, waited in the little chapel of the Nursing Home before it was reverently transferred to the Mother House. She lay in state in the chapel before the altar until the next day. After the Requiem Mass at ten o’clock the Convent pupils, wearing white dresses and black sashes, formed a guard of honour and so accompanied the hearse to the end of the town, on its way to the “Mater Infirmorum”.

Despite the fact that petrol was still strictly rationed since the War, a vast throng of laity and religious – even from other congregations – had gathered for the funeral which was conducted by Right Rev Bishop James Colbert of Port Elizabeth.

“... Well could it be said of her: ‘Love knoweth no measure, feareth no labour, maketh sweet all that is bitter, findeth rest in God alone’...

“... A wonderful scholar, a beautiful musician, an excellent financier and organiser, she capped all these talents by being an outstanding diplomat, with a vitality that was astonishing...

“It was, therefore, not to be wondered at, that her going lay so heavily on the hearts of all who knew and loved her. She was an inspiration to her religious family and she will ever stand to the future generations of her Congregation as an example of a soul loved, enriched and graced by God in a great measure... If a loving mother was lost to this earth, in the Communion of Saints a new Advocate was gained in heaven, where earthly obstacles can no longer thwart the impulses of her loving and generous heart.”⁶

⁶ *Quoted from tributes received after her death.*