

Circular 61/85  
November 9, 1985, Rome, Italy

My dear Sisters,

We stand on the brink of a wonderful day in the history of our congregation: the beatification of our mother and foundress, Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger. We know of the greatness and holiness of our mother; we have come to know her even better since we entered the congregation, and in getting to know her better, we have come to know ourselves better. Mother Theresa was a woman of faith ever seeking God's will; struggling for unity in our international community and responding to urgent needs, preferring the poor, and education with a world vision. (Constitution, Prologue) We share her charism. When we experience in a special way the unity that exists among us, our deep desire for God and for God's way, and ourselves as educators responding to women, youth, and the poor, we recognize again mother's spirit alive in us.

Because our mother is so loved by us, it is possible that our judgment about her could be partial or biased in her favor. That the official church has recognized and will soon publicly proclaim her "blessed," confirms our conviction that our mother is an outstanding example of a Christian woman living according to the three counsels traditionally ascribed to religious within the church.

The official church's judgment regarding our mother's right to be called "blessed" also confirms the recognition of her holiness by many people of God and responds to their desire that she be proclaimed "blessed." Let us briefly consider mother in relation to both these aspects of the church – the people of God and the members of the hierarchical structure of our church.

It was the people of God, specifically a group of Catholic women in Bavaria, who initiated Mother Theresa's cause for beatification. It was fitting that these women "stand up and proclaim her blessed" and "sing her praises," (Prov. 31:28) since throughout her life, mother had served young girls and women. In the process that followed, a great number of the people of God gave public testimony that mother lived an outstanding life of faith, hope, and charity. To this day, it is the people of God in many countries and cultures who "stand up and proclaim her blessed," "sing her praises," (Prov. 31:28) and call upon her in their need with great faith and trust.

Let us consider mother, too, in her relationship to the official church which now confirms the belief of the people of God that she lived an outstanding life of holiness. We are all aware of how mother both loved and struggled with individual members of the clergy and hierarchy. Frequently, she wrote to the Holy Father to assure him of her loyalty and that of her sisters, often she sent an expression of love and loyalty to him through the cardinal protector; consistently, she responded affirmatively to the requests of bishops and priests. Individual members of the clergy and hierarchy knew and loved mother

personally. We recall with joy the words of the Apostolic Nuncio, Aloisi-Masella, who was present at mother's death: "So I would like to die!...How much I thank God that I followed my inspiration and came here when I did. This death is a comfort for my whole life." (Ziegler, p. 304)

But mother also had difficult encounters with members of the clergy and hierarchy. In such instances, she clearly expressed her views and convictions and stood by them, particularly when they were supported by her sisters and were concerned with the kingdom of God. We know of her intense pain and suffering in the search for a motherhouse site in Munich, in the conflict with Archbishop Reisach, and in the long years of waiting to receive the Pope's approbation of her rule. Mother was dauntless in seeking to know and do God's will, and so was ready to submit in obedience when the official church made a final decision. What a confirmation it is now to have this official church, in the person of the Holy Father himself, "stand up and proclaim her blessed" and "sing her praises." (Prov. 31-28)

Mother's beatification is a challenge and call to each of us to re-evaluate our own relationship to both these dimensions of the church – the people of God and the members of the hierarchical structure of our church – and to re-commit ourselves to them.

Mother's love for and service to and with the people of God were expressed primarily through her life as a consecrated religious and through her ministry as an educator. She loved God and the people of God so intensely that she gave her life for them. As a religious, mother responded to some of the basic needs of her times; contemplation, holiness, personal discipline, penance, a life of Christian morality, forgetfulness of self for the good of others, and personal concern for and commitment to the common good of the church and society were values not explicitly fostered and extolled by her times and society. Mother also identified with the people of God in such a way that she was able to perceive and respond to other needs not being met. These needs were so basic and universal that they continue to exist today: education-of women, youth, and the poor.

Just as mother's love for and service to and with the people of God were expressed primarily through her life as a woman religious and through her ministry as an educator, so are we called to serve God's people through our presence and ministry as apostolic women religious and educators. Like her, we as apostolic religious seek union with God and God's people, and it is in and through our ministry to and with the people of God that we most frequently experience, respond to, and serve God. Our ministry totally colors and affects our religious profession and the living out of our religious profession totally colors and affects our ministry.

As in mother's times, so in our times, we, our world, our countries, and our cultures need to recognize the Transcendent, to bring the light of faith to bear on our everyday realities, to recognize and respond to God at work in them. We need to enable one another to find meaning in life, to foster unity, and to provide experiences of community.

We need educators with a world vision, convinced of the need to foster interdependence and collaboration within our church and among people nations. Women, youth, and the poor need to be ministered to in their specific situations and we need to receive from them and others.

Let us consider again whether we are making serious and consistent efforts as consecrated religious to achieve union with God and God's people; whether we are courageously seeking out and responding to needs not being met by others; whether we are educating with a world vision and enabling others to reach their full potential and to use their gifts; whether we are being creative about determining and developing the meaning of "instruction" and "character development" in our world today; whether we view our ministry in light of its effect on community life.

As we consider our presence and ministry to and with the people of God, let us also consider these aspects of our lives in relation to members of the hierarchical structure of our church. Since the time of Mother Theresa, the entire church has changed its understanding of itself; accordingly our understanding and vision of the hierarchy is different from that of Mother Theresa; however, we, too, accept the hierarchical structure of our church. In mother's spirit, we are called to love and be loyal to members of the hierarchy. Should we experience difficulties as did she, we are called to express clearly our views and convictions and to stand by them, particularly when they are supported by our sisters and are concerned with the kingdom of God; like our mother, we need to be ready to submit in obedience when the official church makes definitive decisions. Mother was both courageous and obedient; we follow in her spirit.

In light of mother's life and example, let us reflect on our own attitude toward, loyalty to, and willingness to cooperate with members of the hierarchy as well as on our spirit of obedience and our call as women religious within the church to be a part of the charismatic element of the church. The call of the church itself to foster a mutual relationship between religious and members of the hierarchy is a challenge to us; the fostering of such a relationship requires a basic interior freedom and deep affective love for the entire church and for the reign of God. These were the attitudes of our mother.

It is a special grace for us that the date of the beatification is November 17, (1985). This enables over 800 School Sisters of Notre Dame from 20 countries to be present in the Generalate on November 16, exactly 150 years from the day on which mother took her vows as the first School Sister of Notre Dame.

Mother's biographer says of her: "She herself yearned for (her profession of religious vows) with her whole heart." (Ziegler, p. 70) Great as was her longing, even greater was the act of faith this profession manifested. Mother could have had no idea of what the future held for her or for the young congregation she was founding. She took a vowed stance toward life in an era that favored neither a faith dimension of life, nor the values of poverty, chastity, obedience, and Christian education. Mother's was a simple, yet profound response to the love and call of God that she experienced in her heart. She wanted what God wanted; she wanted God and God wanted her. The mutual love

commitment into which she entered gave stability, courage, consolation, and challenge to her entire life, for her entire life.

The solemn act that took place at a simple private ceremony on November 16, 1835, in the chapel of St. Gallus in Regensburg at 6:45, immediately after the Mass, moved Caroline “to the depths of her soul.” (Ziegler, p. 70) The bishop who accepted her vows described it thus: “her sobbing prevented her from reading the profession formula and she could only repeat it in broken words as her confessor, Father Siegert, read it for her,” (Ziegler, p. 68)

“I Theresa of Jesus,  
vow and promise God Almighty,  
Mary, his glorious mother,  
St. Augustine, all the dear saints,  
And your reverence, to keep  
The rule of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Insofar as it has been approved  
By the reverend bishop,  
To devote all my life to God therein,  
And to live in obedience,  
In poverty, and in chastity  
And in instructing female youth.”

Little could mother have imagined on that day, that exactly 150 years later, many of her spiritual daughters from around the world would gather for her beatification and would renew together their vows to devote their lives entirely to God and to live consecrated celibacy, gospel poverty, and apostolic obedience in her spirit.

Today, we School Sisters of Notre Dame take the same vowed stance toward life in our era as mother did in hers. Our era, like hers, does not favor a faith dimension of life. Many of our cultures value consumerism and possession rather than poverty and simplicity, pleasure and hedonism rather than chastity and celibacy, domination and self-interest rather than obedience and the common search for God’s will. Today we are called in a special way to understand and live our religious vows not only as a response to God’s love but also as a wholehearted act of resistance to the values and human wisdom often proposed by our cultures.

Because of the rapidity of change in our times, we, even more than our mother, have no idea of what the future holds for us personally or for our congregation. Our vowed commitment requires of us, too, a profound act of faith, a simple, yet total response to the love and call of God that each of us experiences in her own heart. Each of us wants what God wants; we want God, and God wants us. The mutual love commitment into

which we entered gives stability, courage, consolation, and challenge to our entire lives, for our entire lives.

Like our mother, there are certain times in our lives when we, too can hardly pronounce the profession formula because we are moved to the depths of our souls as we renew this solemn act. Yet, with the grace of God, and in mother's spirit, we pray: "I offer myself totally to you...I vow to live forever..." (G.D. No. 30) In response we accept the words mother spoke to her sisters as spoken to us today: "At your profession, dear sisters, I promised you eternal life in the name of Jesus, if you live faithful to your vows." (Letter # 714)

I presume that as School Sisters of Notre Dame gathered in Rome renew their vowed commitment on November 16, those of you not present will renew your vows together or individually. Thus, throughout the world, in the spirit of our mother and in response to God, we glorify God through our lives offered, consecrated, and broken for many.

Although she will be proclaimed "blessed," mother was not perfect and she was the first to recognize and acknowledge this. Beatification proclaims, however that grace is able to overcome and transform sinfulness and weakness. Mother herself shows us the way to cope with these realities. She writes: "O God, although I well know that my self love will never quite die, I shall endeavor to recognize it more and more and to destroy it; but should I be surprised by a fault of self love, I shall not worry about it; but I will acknowledge my weakness yet continue in your service full of courage." (Letter # 2) In this and in many other ways, mother showed us how to respond to God, ourselves, our church, and our times. In addition, we have her very spirit within us which enables us to live as she did.

Although we did not know mother during her mortal life, we do know her personally and intimately now; and, precisely because we did not know her in her earthly existence, we are in a privileged position. What she wrote on March 4, 1878, applies to us: "To you sisters who are personally unknown to me..., I extend a special motherly greeting... Even though this mortal life...has required of (you) and of me a keen sacrifice, the dear Lord, who never lets anything go unrewarded, will surely repay (you) for all. Our joy at seeing one another will be so much the happier in eternity, where there will be no more separation, but where we will rejoice in eternally thanking and praising the one triune God. For this I hope...May Jesus bless you! We shall see each other in heaven."

Let us live confidently and freely with this assurance and with the sacred trust that has been given us. In faithfully doing so, we, her daughters, "stand up and proclaim her blessed, sing her praises, and...extol her: 'Many women have done admirable things, but you surpass them all!'" (Prov. 31:28, 29)

Gratefully and prayerfully,

Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, SSND  
General Superior