

Notre Dame “Cousins” share Roots, Charism throughout the World.

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NAMA NEWS, March 2006

Independent congregations, all of whom can trace their origins to Peter Fourier and Alix LeClerc, have met every two or three years since 1983, with the last meeting held in Munich in September 2004. These Notre Dame “cousins” have elements of their charism that have been identified as common to all or most of these congregations, including education, poverty, unity, devotion to Mary and Eucharist.

During the 1995 meeting of the Notre Dame “cousins” one of the speakers had used the image of fire in speaking of the nature of charism. At the end of the meeting, one general superior “returned to that image in her evaluation, stating that for her, the association did not represent congregations that have traveled separate ways but women that have been ignited by the same spark and continue to share the light that they have received.” (Sister Patricia Flynn, Circular 64/95, November 21, 1995)

The woman who was the impetus for this, Blessed Alix Le Clerc, was convinced that God was calling her to the education of young girls whom she believed were regarded as “worthless straw.” Because no established structures existed for such a vision, she gathered five companions and with St. Peter Fourier, who was the local pastor, made plans for a new religious congregation.

The Canonesses of St. Augustine of the Congregation of Notre Dame made their first consecration together on December 25, 1597. In spite of poverty, misunderstanding, and resistance from church authorities, the new venture flourished and spread throughout France and into southern Germany. At the time, the idea of women religious without cloister was inconceivable consequently, Blessed Alix and St. Peter negotiated with church authorities for a form of cloister to which children could be admitted for teaching. Each convent included the free education of poor girls as part of its mission.

During the French Revolution, the order was suppressed in France but expanded and spread in other European countries. In 1833, Caroline Gerhardinger, a former student at the school in Bavaria that was suppressed in 1809, established a new form of the Notre Dame Sisters.

Her vision was of a new structure of small convents affordable to small villages, united under a central motherhouse and freed from papal enclosure. Hampered by all the misunderstanding and opposition that so often greet a new vision, she persevered, and from their Motherhouse in Munich, the School Sisters of Notre Dame had spread and flourished in Bavaria, North America, and several other Central European countries before Blessed Theresa died in 1879.

Several independent Notre Dame congregations were also established, two or them during the lifetime of Blessed Theresa. All of these congregations can trace their

origins to Blessed Alix Le Clerc and St. Peter Fourier and are sometimes referred to as Notre Dame “cousins.” They also share many common elements of their charism including education, poverty, unity, devotion to Mary and Eucharist.

Notre Dame Sisters

The Rev. Gabriel Schneider founded the first of these new congregations, the community of Notre Dame Sisters, in Hyršov, Bohemia, in 1853 (now the Czech Republic). Blessed Theresa had established a mission there in 1851, but interference on the part of the Archbishop of Munich led to the establishment of an independent congregation. The Notre Dame Sisters of Omaha, Nebraska, make up one province of this international congregation with its generalate in the Czech Republic. More information about this congregation is available at <http://www.notredamesisters.org>.

School Sisters of Our Lady

In 1860, S. M. Theresia Franz brought a group of Notre Dame Sisters and novices from Bohemia to Kalocsa in Hungary, where she remained and founded the School Sisters of Our Lady, a new, independent congregation.

Sisters of Notre Dame of Bácka

After World War I, conditions were such that the Notre Dame Sisters from Hungary who were in Yugoslavia finally formed another independent community, the Sisters of Notre Dame of Bácka, in Subotica in 1930.

Sisters of Notre Dame in Croatia

Conditions during World War II caused the Notre Dame Sisters who were in Yugoslavia to form yet another independent community in 1941 known as the Sisters of Notre Dame in Croatia. Although this congregation was not founded by “our” Blessed Theresa, a biography of Blessed Theresa’s, *Love Cannot Wait*, by S. Benilda Dix, SSND, has been translated into Croatian under the title *Ljubav Ne Moze Cekati*, because these sisters have a great love for her.

Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame

A group of Notre Dame Sisters, mostly of German descent, fled Yugoslavia and Croatia after World War II. They formed an independent congregation, the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame, in Bad Niedernau, Germany, which was approved in 1974.

Congrégation de Notre-Dame

St. Marguerite Bourgeoys founded the Congrégation de Notre-Dame in Montreal, Canada, in 1659. This community, which also traces its origins to Blessed Alix and St. Peter Fourier, started as a secular order of teachers in France who lived at home, took no vows, and dedicated themselves to the work of teaching girls. St. Marguerite was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II and is Canada's first woman saint. More information about this congregation is available at <http://www.cnd-m.com/index.html>.