

MOTHER M. ALMEDA SCHRICKER (1928-1955)

It was a singular and in some ways compensatory act of Divine Providence that Mother Bruno with her austere character would be followed by a very motherly woman whose kindness gladdened many sisters. Of all people, this warmhearted, rather anxious woman was destined to lead the congregation through the most difficult trial of its history, the duration of the Third Reich. Whenever threatened, she was helped by a childlike, unshakable confidence in the assistance of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom she had solemnly consecrated the congregation and whom she had declared to be the actual general superior.

Sister Almeda was from the Upper Palatinate. She was born of a simple artisan's family in Tirschenreuth near the northern Bohemian border on April 28, 1879. After attending the sisters' school, she continued her education in the candidature, passing all her examinations with excellence. Sister Almeda was one of the first School Sisters of Notre Dame to attend the University of Munich, after which she was placed in charge of the religious teacher training institute at the motherhouse. In 1922, she was elected to be a general assistant, which familiarized her with the difficult tasks of the generalate and prepared her for her election as general superior six years later.

By the time Mother Almeda was installed into office in 1928, Munich had already been the scene of repeated political unrest and bloody incidents. A significant event during her term of office, the centenary celebration of the congregation, stood under the menacing shadow of the National Socialist State. During the major festivities at the motherhouse in Munich in May 1934, the Brown Shirts took their place at the entrances to the schoolyard that had been turned into a festive place for the liturgies. Every morning a solemn High Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated there and the yard and adjoining festival hall were filled with various groups of guests. If there had not been so many guests from other countries, it is certain that the celebration would have been disturbed much more conspicuously.

In 1935, Mother Almeda experienced a raid by officials from the foreign exchange surveillance personnel. They searched the generalate rooms to the last corner, looking for proof of currency violations. The general superior was tormented with hour-long interrogations. Many years later, Mother Almeda could speak of these days only with tears. The search uncovered nothing in Munich, but the superior at Arnsberg in Westphalia became a victim of arbitrary injustice and, as were many other religious superiors, sentenced to imprisonment and a heavy fine. This caused Mother Almeda deep sorrow.

During the same year, 1935, religious schools, a thorn in the eye of the National Socialists, began to be closed. As a result of the teacher training reform, the former teacher training institute at the motherhouse was changed into a German secondary school which prepared students to take the university entrance examinations. Students

were expected to receive their professional training at the teachers' colleges still to be established. The sisters received permission to change the remaining lower classes of the teacher training institute into an intermediate school, but new students were forbidden to register. The last teaching examination was administered in 1937 and four years later, the last university entrance examination took place at the school so rich in tradition, the oldest of its kind in Bavaria.

The dismissal of religious elementary school teachers began in Bavaria in 1936 and continued until the last years of World War II. Hundreds of sisters were unemployed and had no income. Those who lived in official school residences were also homeless. All religious secondary schools were closed by 1941. Either they were taken over by the government or they were closed when the last class graduated. If the school buildings were not sold or leased, they were confiscated. These measures affected all convent schools in the entire German Reich and were implemented more or less rigorously, depending on the attitude of the local authorities.

With hundreds of sisters to care for, Mother Almeda found support from various sides—from the church, from patrons and friends, and from faithful Catholics. Most of the sisters were able to stay in their homeland where they were trained for pastoral services or for the various services of the *Caritas* organization. After the war began, many of the houses belonging to the congregation were confiscated for use as military hospitals, to house children evacuated from the cities, and for resettlement purposes. The sisters gave these people the same care that they had previously devoted to the children and young people in school.

Many sisters were willing to emigrate and 70 Bavarian sisters and candidates left for North America to help there. New fields of labor opened up in England, Brazil, Argentina, Switzerland, Sweden, and Holland, where 150 sisters and candidates were sent to serve. There were so many requests for sisters to do the most varied tasks that Mother Almeda actually experienced a scarcity of personnel. The sisters' fidelity and willingness to take on any kind of work were a great consolation for her in this time of distress. Approximately 500 candidates were given the freedom to leave or even urged to do so, but many remained faithful to their vocation.

The situation became especially difficult after the air raids began. European convents were turned into ruins and ashes. On December 17, 1944, the venerable Anger Convent and St. James Church, one of the oldest churches in Munich, were destroyed. The school building was struck but remained sufficiently intact that it could be used as provisional living quarters for the homeless convent community.

Eight sisters died in the hail of bombs in Augsburg, Vienna, and Dresden. As the eastern front moved closer and closer to Munich, sisters from Poland, Silesia, and Hungary poured into Bavaria as refugees, seeking help and protection from the mother of the congregation who learned from them alarming news about the lot of some sisters and some missions when enemy troops marched in.

After the ceasefire and the cession of all Silesia to Poland, a new home had to be found for the German sisters who had to leave the country if they did not opt for Poland. Mother Almeda managed to buy a suitable villa in a large park in Berlin-Marienfelde which could be transformed into a motherhouse. Eventually all the expelled sisters found a home and suitable employment in the Russian-occupied zone of Germany, in Berlin, or in the houses of the Westphalian and Bavarian provinces. The archives in the Munich motherhouse contain many letters and reports written by sisters who told about their expulsion and flight and gave evidence of their devotion to and love for the mother of the congregation who had won their hearts during her visitation journeys. In order to stand with her afflicted sisters and give them counsel and assistance, Mother Almeda undertook difficult and dangerous journeys in unheated railroad cars with shattered windows and subject to attack by low flying aircraft.

After the war, much work in the schools awaited the sisters. The military government returned schools to congregations of women religious and allowed them to reopen in the fall of 1945. Since many teachers were not permitted to teach at first due to their affiliation with the party, the sisters in Bavaria often had to teach in shifts. The sisters who had emigrated were missed, but only a few of them could be called back. Moreover, the National Socialist government had prohibited entrance into a religious community and had closed the teacher training schools in the motherhouse and the Au Convent.

Not only were there positions in schools to be filled, but room had to be found for the children who were applying for admission and could only be taught in improvised quarters. Space was very limited in the motherhouse school and in Weichs where the novitiate and the lower classes of the recently reopened teacher training institute were housed. The number of day students increased so rapidly that the existing rooms were insufficient. It was absolutely necessary to rebuild the Anger Convent and repair the heavily damaged and partially destroyed houses in Munich-Au, Munich-Giesing, and other cities and towns, but there was no money. Only the worst ruins could be cleared away at first and the buildings somewhat restored.

It was a miracle that Mother Almeda survived under the weight of this difficult period. After the worst was over, her health failed. She was near death, but an operation saved her in the fall of 1946. The distinguished surgeon attributed his success more to the prayers of the sisters than to his own ability. By the fall of 1947, she had recovered sufficiently and was able to fly to America and join in the American sisters' centennial celebration. After World War II, their loyalty and assistance became evident again in a truly touching manner. After the entry of the American troops into Munich, an American officer and former student of the sisters appeared at the motherhouse with greetings from the American sisters and a giant package of real coffee as a first gift. This was followed by a steady stream of alms to all the European houses in need of help until things began to improve again.

The general chapter held in 1950 confirmed Mother Almeda as general superior for life. Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich had advised her not to resign, but her very first visitation

journey showed that her health was broken. In 1953, she celebrated the golden jubilee of her profession and her silver jubilee in office. On May 10, 1954, Minister President Ehard presented her with the Great Medal of Distinguished Service from the Federal Republic of Germany. Nevertheless, the completion of the apostolic process for the beatification of Mother Theresa and the elevation of her remains to St. James Church on July 28, 1954, meant more to Mother Almeda than this honor. Sitting in a wheelchair at a window of the school building, she witnessed the celebration marking the addition of the roof to the new motherhouse in December 1955. Her last great joy was the visit of Mother Andrina, the commissary general from North America, with whom she was united in heartfelt sisterly love.

On December 29, 1955, Mother Almeda's tired heart stopped beating, and on New Year's Eve, the crypt under the newly built St. James Church received her mortal remains.

Material taken from *The Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame: An International Educational Congregation with Bavarian Origins, 1833-1983*, by Maria Liobgid Ziegler, +June 18, 1983. Revised and completed by Maria Therese Barnikel, 1985.