

MOTHER M. BRUNO THOMA (1909-1928)

Small of stature but very energetic, Mother Bruno was already 64 years old when she was elected. Her ancestors had come from the northern part of the Upper Palatinate and were recognized for their services in the Bavarian forestry. Her father was a gamekeeper at the forestry office in Wörnbrunn.

Caroline was born in 1845 and grew up with seven brothers. At the age of eight, she lost her mother and was entrusted to the sisters to be raised and educated at the Anger Convent in Munich. She surpassed all her classmates, not only in diligence but also in achievement, and when she was 16, she decided to enter the congregation. With outstanding success, she passed the teaching examinations, as well as examinations in English, French and Italian. At her reception, she was given the name Sister Mary Bruno. The masculine name became characteristic for her and she energetically attacked the problems which had caused her predecessor so much anxiety.

For 14 years, Sister Mary Bruno was a revered and beloved teacher and prefect of the boarders at the motherhouse. This was followed by 12 years as teacher and superior in Gorizia in what is now Italy. In 1894, she was called to Rosenheim to direct an institute with a secondary school for girls which the city had built and which she brought to flourishing development within a short time.

Sister Mary Bruno's election as general superior in 1909 showed the wisdom of the sisters at the general chapter who called this energetic woman, despite her age, to head the congregation at a time so difficult for communities committed to education.

After negotiations with the city and supported by the prayer of the sisters, Mother Bruno finally succeeded in purchasing the needed construction site from the city of Munich. During the war years, 1914-1918, the magnificent school building adjoining the Anger Convent arose on the site and provided space for all the schools that were formerly in the motherhouse. The classrooms were furnished and equipped in accordance with the most recent educational requirements. The school was built so solidly that during World War II, three highly explosive air raids could not destroy it. Experts declared that the school was one of the best constructed buildings in the city of Munich.

Mother Bruno sent talented sisters to the university so that they could be qualified to teach in secondary schools and the teacher training college in Munich. She sent candidates to the already existing secondary schools in the city so they could qualify for admission to academic studies. During the interim, she hired secular teachers for the classes on the secondary level that had been added to the schools after 1918. Eventually religious teachers replaced some of these secular teachers. These were momentous decisions requiring much prayer and reflection for a general superior who watched over the observance of religious discipline with great exactitude.

With the completion of the new school building, rooms in the old convent were made available for the expansion of the candidature. More than 300 candidates filled the rooms of the motherhouse by the time Mother Bruno ended her term as general superior.

With great strength, Mother Bruno guided the congregation through the sufferings and hardships of World War I and the post-war period marked with hunger, disease, and poverty. In 1919, the motherhouse, situated in the center of the city of Munich, was in the cross-fire between Communists and government troops who liberated the city. Some of these troops were encamped in the courtyard of the Anger Convent until the “red specter” was defeated later that year.

During the war, eastern areas of the congregation were close to the front or in the midst of the line of fire. After the war ended, the area was plunged into political chaos for a time and peace treaties resulted in serious problems and heavy burdens for the sisters. It was a time of pain, sadness, and anguish for the elderly general superior, but the fidelity and assistance of sisters of the congregation who could give financial help were a source of joy and gratitude.

After America’s entrance into World War I in 1917, communication with the American provinces was cut off for more than two years. On August 20, 1919, Mother Bruno received the first letter from the Milwaukee motherhouse, and on April 20, 1920, a telegram came from the American commissary general, Mother Stanislaus Kostka, who was in Paris, asking to be met in Basel. She wanted to see for herself where she could be of greatest help. She not only provided needed funds and material for clothing, but also organized a unique relief campaign. Everything needed by the European houses was sent to the sisters—textiles, linens, food items, medical supplies, and materials for sewing and writing. These shipments continued until economic conditions stabilized somewhat in 1925.

Mother Bruno was also granted abundant consolation. The unity which Mother Theresa had enjoined on the sisters was severely tested and remained strong. This contributed to an increasingly deeper consciousness of the greatness of the foundress. Mother Bruno and the generalate took up the suggestion of the Catholic Women’s League in Bavaria and the Cardinal Protector, Wilhelm van Rossum, and requested that the process leading to Mother Theresa’s beatification would be opened.

In spite of continual illness due to a stomach ailment, Mother Bruno accomplished great things during the nearly 20 years of her term of office. In 1928, she retired at the age of 83, but she accompanied the congregation with faithful prayer and good advice until her death on February 14, 1939.

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.

