

The Chain of Love: The Life and Work of Mother Mary Almeda Schricker, SSND, Superior – General 1928-1955.

Anne Winkelmann, SSND, 1992.

An outline of the biography of Mother Almeda is given below. Her love of Mary is highlighted so that readers might understand the challenges she faced. Mary offered Mother Almeda protection and insight in deciding very difficult questions, especially under Mary's mantle at her shrine in Birkenstein.

Visit to North America, 1933 (celebrating the centenary of the Congregation)

1. Mother Almeda noticed layers of rock formations as she traveled on new highways in the U.S. dynamited recently. Geography and history were her majors at the University of Munich. She also loved watching chicks hatching at the Baltimore retirement center, Notch Cliff at the "chicken hatchery" run by European SSNDs in 1933.
2. A nephew of Cardinal Diepenbrock is buried in Westphalia, MO and she visited his burial site.
3. Mother Almeda followed Mother Theresa's itinerary of 1847, including Harrisburg, PA, where she prayed for S. Emmanuela who had died there.

Returning to Troubled Germany, 1933

4. In Germany in 1933 she recommended that sisters come to some agreement with their neighbors about a signal to be given in case of need, since so many robberies "have been attempted and so many convents are in isolated places." (The political system was deteriorating and inflation made necessities difficult to get. Therefore robberies were increasing.)
5. In 1933, the aging President Von Hindenburg, had been induced to confer Chancellorship of Germany onto Hitler when his party received 44% of the vote. Quite a plurality in a country with 30 political parties. p. 73
6. Shortly after Hitler's victory she called sisters to "a love that never becomes embittered."

German Communist Threat, Eugenio Pacelli and Hitler

7. Hitler's promise to safeguard the "two Christian confessions, Lutheran and Catholic, led Eugenio Pacelli who had been Nuncio in Munich from 1917 – 1930, to see Hitler as the lesser of two evils. He was Papal Secretary of State in 1933, and feared Communism, seeing it as a greater threat than Nazism.
8. **In 1919, there had been a Communist Revolution in Germany when the Red flag flew from the twin towers of the Cathedral of Our Lady, in Munich and Kurt Eisner, a Jewish Communist from Berlin, ruled for a few months as Premier of Catholic Bavaria. The people were called to recite all 15 decades of the rosary each day for 9 days, and this was practiced in all Munich convents. It was called the Pompeian Devotion and kept**

the country from becoming a permanent victim to Communism. Eugenio Pacelli was living in Munich during this time and saw Communism as a great threat.

Response of Mother Almeda: Turning to Mary

- 9. On Nov. 30, 1934, Mother Almeda called for a congregation-wide dedication to Mary to take place throughout the Congregation on Dec. 8. This was to become an annual event lasting for 20 years.**
- 10. In 1928, Mother Almeda had consecrated her administration to Mary and asked all superiors to do the same, “for if Mary was indeed the superior of each mission of the congregation, a true unity and equality would necessarily exist among all the sisters.”**

Hitler’s Boldness

- 11. 1935, Germany was rearming (against the rules of the Versailles Treaty) to “guard Europe against Communism” said Hitler. And no European leaders protested.**
- 12. 1935, S. Canisia Bruggemann was imprisoned for paying for a school debt in German money. The debt was owed to a Dutch firm that had made improvements at the school. After the work had been completed a German law was promulgated stating that German money could not be used to pay debts incurred outside the country. The banker who had arranged the transaction assured her that since the law went into effect after the transaction, that there was nothing illegal about the exchange. However, the Nazis used S. Canisia as an example and imprisoned and fined her. Mother Almeda helped pay the fine and when S. Canisia was released Mother Almeda carried a heavy iron chain to our Lady of Birkenstein as an “ex-voto offering.”**

Advice to Sisters

- 13. 1936, sisters were to take an inventory of the house and school, label it and draw up a price list. Take all documents, chronicles, school documents and keep them in one place, lest you have to depart in a hurry. Keep day care and kindergartens open during vacations to protect the children.**

Repercussions on Sisters for Non-Cooperation with Nazism

- 14. In 1937, 300 sisters were forced to leave schools. p. 88**
- 15. Sisters should be ready to study English and go to America. They were to have lay clothes in a safe place in case of need. (Ed. note: 2% left the community throughout the entire war period.)**

16. Also in 1937, Mother Almeda sent out a questionnaire to each sister asking her to name other skills besides teaching that she would consider as well as naming family or friends with whom she could stay in case of necessity. These skills include nursing, gardening, caring for animals, sewing, etc. It was these skills that later helped support the Congregation when few sisters were employed in education. p. 89
17. Feb. 2, 1937, the SSND directories were to be burned, with the exception of 1936. This directory lists only the names and locations of the sisters without any description of their ministries.

Pope Pius XI and Hitler

18. March 14, 1937, Pius XI's fiery encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* was smuggled into Germany and read on Sunday morning. It brought Hitler's wrath against the Church. Those responsible for duplicating and distributing the encyclical could be imprisoned. Pope Pius XI made it very clear that this was the time for "heroism" even if it meant loss of job, imprisonment, etc. There was no way a Catholic could also be a Nazi. The two were incompatible.

Mother Almeda's Words and her Trust in Mary

19. **It was at this time that Mother Almeda addressed her letters with "My dear precious sisters..." (quite unusual in our SSND history)**
20. **Mary was her haven in these troubled times and she would visit Our Lady of Birkenstein where she would go to rest. A song to Our Lady speaks of safety under her mantel, and Mother Almeda often used similar images in her letters.**
21. **Other significant letters are dated on feasts of Mary, Mary Help of Christians, Mother of Good Counsel, etc.**

Continuing Losses

22. In 1937, September, 40% of all Bavarian SSND teaching positions had been lost. Sisters had work, but with a great loss of income. (Named in #16 above.)
23. 1938, summer, loss of additional 200 teaching positions. Earlier threats of taking over SSND owned property at the Motherhouse and Partenkirchen were renewed.
24. Sisters found work in the Diaspora, those states in Germany with few Catholics. This area later formed East Germany. p. 97 (examples of Sisters in Diaspora)
25. In 1938 on St. James feast, July 25, 515 school positions "are now lost" to us, plus 175 House sisters without work = 700 sisters with no income. Throughout this difficult period reception and profession ceremonies were being held and Mother Almeda was encouraging new vocations.

Continuing Sorrows

26. September 15, 1938, Our Lady of Sorrows, Mother Almeda wrote to America. At this time she noted the difficulties among cultures when boundaries and national identities shifted. After World War I the Allies had ignored a plea to establish new countries respecting ethnic minorities. The Sudetenland with its three million Germans had been forced to become part of a country made up of mixed German, Slavonic, and Polish-speaking peoples. This unstable situation had required both Mother Bruno and Mother Almeda to make otherwise unnecessary changes in superiors and personnel as the various new national groups asserted their identity by demanding their own ethnic principals and teachers. Thus a school in an area that had shifted national boundaries might require an entire new faculty even through the student body remained the same.

27. In 1938, 98 Postulants entered the Novitiate and 88 Sisters pronounced final VOWS.

28. Feb. 14, 1939, Mother Bruno died. (See "General Superiors" under **Creative Fidelity** in Sturdy Roots II.) She had been Mother Almeda's predecessor and close confidant for 10 years of her term, and the last SSND to know Mother Theresa personally. This was a great personal loss for her.

Nazi Pressure Moving Closer

29. March 31, 1939, the last Mass was offered at St. James church. (Located within the Munich Motherhouse this served as the Motherhouse chapel as well as the parish church.) The city rented several floors of the school building because it was one of the best equipped in Munich. Some sisters were still allowed to teach the classical secondary school and finishing school, but 11 new lay teachers took over other classes.

Relationship to Pope Pius XII

30. While Eugenio Pacelli was Nuncio in Munich, a Bavarian School Sister of Notre Dame, S. Gerhardis, served as his secretary. He also had profession ceremonies at the motherhouse in 1921. He was considered a friend of the Congregation.

Mary gave her Hope

31. In her retreats to Birkenstein, Mother Almeda "prayed" the directory (listing all sisters) to Mary, begging her to keep each sister safe.

Practical Advice

32. She encouraged superiors to be aware of what was happening in the press, on the radio, and through conversation with reliable friends. (At this time such things were strictly forbidden throughout the Congregation.)
33. Sept. 1, 1939, the invasion of Poland brought a letter from Mother Almeda encouraging sisters to offer their services and buildings to help the German Folk.
- 34. She speaks in November of examples of sisters caring for the wounded, saying that they gave the soldiers rosaries, medals, etc. But what they really wanted, one of the soldiers confessed, was to take the cook Sister along with them!**

Dislocation

35. Most of the Novices from Lemburg, Poland, banded together and escaped to Silesia asking to be admitted to the Breslau Province.
36. In 1939, a letter came from Mother Fidelis in Milwaukee to Mother Almeda: "Come what may, we remain faithful. Fidelity is the affair, the characteristic of the Notre Dame Sisters..." At Mother Fidelis' death ten years later, Mother Almeda recalled and quoted the lines in her letter of sympathy to the American sisters.
- 37. December, 1939, "Let us in our cloistered circle renew our dedication with joy and devotion..." (Referring to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.)**
38. Few letters were written during the war for fear of censorship.

Mother Fidelis

39. April 18, 1941, Mother Fidelis Krieter was elected Commissary General in the U.S. She was to become her dear and faithful friend throughout the war years and beyond.

Living in Wartime

40. German sisters were encouraged to become nurses' aids, which meant they were caring for the Wehrmacht, regular German army, not Nazis or Brown Shirts.
41. 1942, the sisters were not allowed to sell things to prisoners of war or help them in any way. Mother Almeda reminded sisters of the law. (Ed. note: German SSNDs in Fussen did feed American prisoners of war and after the war the Americans sent them white woolen cloth, toothbrushes, flour, sugar, etc. in gratitude. This is from the Bavarian chronicles. (See "Care Packages" under **Living in Wartime** in *Sturdy Roots I*.)

42. At the same time, Josepha Mack, a candidate stationed in Dachau, was encouraged to smuggle letters, etc. to the priests at Dachau. (See "Imma Mack" under **Living in Wartime** in *Sturdy Roots I*.)
43. Sisters were not to work on Sundays, even if they were paid, nor to work more than 10 hours a day.
44. Mother Almeda counsels education for Candidates, especially spirituality.
45. **She went to Birkenstein, where with her secretary, S. Telesphora, she found time to pray and rest. She loved being among the people and the natural beauty. The simple farmers spoke to her in Bayerisch: "God watch over you, pretty farm-lady" a countryman is supposed to have greeted her one day...**

Allied Bombing Begins: Sisters Participate in War Effort

46. Allied bombing of German cities began May 30, 1942.
47. She mentioned the sisters mending and sewing for soldiers: 3310 pullovers, 5552 pairs of socks, 432 pairs of leggings, 2381 pair of gloves with fingers, etc.
48. Some sisters had to work in munitions factories or a steel mill, living alone and making little money. *Caritas International* helped them survive. The desired position was to work in a hospital run by sisters.

Caring for Elderly

49. 1943, Mother Almeda found homes in rural areas to evacuate elderly sisters. She also fell and broke her left arm while on visitation.

Celebrating

50. Sept. 20, 1943, she wrote to remind sisters to pray in gratitude for the Poor Clare Convent given to Theresa 100 years ago on Oct. 16, 1843.
51. Oct. 24, 1943 gives details of the centenary of SSND in the Poor Clare Convent. Cardinal Faulhaber celebrated a High Mass and a talk was given by S. Liobgid Ziegler on the history of the Anger convent.
52. **On New Year's Eve, 1943 she wrote: "Only a few more hours and the fateful year 1943 will have sunk into the sea of eternity... Though (these 365 days) have brought us much anxiety, worry, and grief, still a sincere Magnificat resounds in our thankful hearts for all God's wonderful protection in so many dangers, for the Lord's merciful help in the difficult tasks the times have given us, for the rich blessings we were permitted to experience day after day."**

Hospitality to other Sisters

53. 1944, SSND gave generous hospitality to sisters of other orders and later these sisters helped Mother Almeda staff the schools for which she did not have enough of her own sisters.

Emergency Plan Devised and Bombing Continues

54. She gives the plan devised in case the motherhouse should be bombed.
55. April 24 – 25, 1944, the motherhouse was bombed but no one was hurt.
56. Mid July, 1944, the bombing of St. James Church happened after the homily. The debris was cleared and Mass resumed. Mother Almeda received communion at that Mass.
57. Because part of the motherhouse was leased for office space by the government, it was considered a military target.
58. August 22, 1944, Mother Almeda had prepared 17 Postulants for reception. But due to the uncertainty of the times their reception was postponed for a year. Josepha Mack was one of those and her father had said it would be foolish for her to go to Munich for profession while the bombing continued. (Ed. Note: Perhaps this advice by a worried parent helped make the decision.)
59. In gratitude for being spared the sisters took it upon themselves to feed 1000 refugees in the Russian camp.
60. Dec. 20, 1944, the Munich motherhouse was bombed. (See “Motherhouse Bombing,” under **Living in Wartime** in *Sturdy Roots I*.)
- 61. Because of the destruction the generalate was moved to Birkenstein, a small village 45 miles from Munich and the site of the Marian shrine that gave Mother Almeda courage.**
- 62. Jan. 1, 1945, she wrote from Birkenstein, “Praised by Jesus Christ! Let this be my first greeting of the New Year... Praised be Mary, our Queen, our Mother, our leader.” (Fuehrerin) Here Mother Almeda uses the German word in which no sister who read the letter missed the oblique reference to the essential unimportance of Hitler who considered himself the one and only Fuehrer Germany and the Germans would ever need.**
63. Jan. 7, 1945, saturation bombing of Munich.

Welcomed SSND Refugees in Weiden

64. Feb. 1945, she had heard that sisters and orphans were coming to Weiden from Silesia. She made the dangerous journey to welcome them, not knowing which train stations had been bombed out, etc. (Ed. note: Not as easy task for a 65 year old woman who had served 20 years in administration fraught with anxiety.)

Efforts at End of War

65. Mother Almeda acknowledges that had Germany won the war, “the last hour would have struck for the Catholic Church and the religious orders in Germany.”
66. She expresses gratitude for the care packages coming from SSNDs in North America. (See “Care Packages” under **Living in Wartime**, *Sturdy Roots I*)

67. Sisters are employed since there are so few teachers available. Since they had no previous ties with the Nazis, they were called upon immediately to open schools. Because of the scarcity of teachers they were teaching two to four separate sessions a day. Children came to school for three days a week, either morning or afternoon. Teaching materials were in short supply.
68. Mother Almeda was given an award in 1953 for the efforts of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to help restore the educational system. (See “General Superiors“ under **Creative Fidelity** in *Sturdy Roots II*)

Mother Almeda’s Health

69. November, 1946, Mother Almeda was in the clinic where she had a 16 inch intestinal ulcer removed.

70. Concern for Teachers

71. She was concerned about the stress on teachers who are dealing with 3-4 sessions of school each day; different students, same teacher.
72. She encourages teachers to teach students about the seasons, and watch for growth and ripening of fruit, something wartime Germany had seldom had the luxury to enjoy.

Love for Mary

73. In her letter of 1947 celebrating the centenary of School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America, she speaks of the necessity of love – the sublime love of God, so self-evident that she need not elaborate, **love for Our Lady**, love our Sisters, love of the children. “By this should we School sisters be known – that we understand how to love as Our Lord Himself has taught us: unselfishly, with our whole being, yes, unto the very giving of our lives for His sake.”

Continued Health Problems, Mary’s Intercession, and Words of Concern

74. Letter before her surgery in November, 1946, “...Every dear Sister, no matter where she comes from whether she was summoned from a nother mission of our Province, or whether she was accepted into our Province as a refugee, should feel at home in every convent, even the smallest, should be considered as having equal rights with the ‘old-timers.’ No petty local ‘patriotism’ should be admitted; in its universality, too, our Order should be an image of our holy Catholic Church.’

75. Mother Almeda asked Mother Fidelis to take over the superiorship of the Czech province because the Czech government would not allow the sisters to contact Munich since their hatred of Germany was so great.
- 76. When the incision didn't heal she had to undergo a second surgery. Her physician, Dr. Lebsche, placed his confidence in a statue of Mary, Our Sorrowful Mother. This image was the one he had rescued during the bombing of Munich and to which he had given a safe place in the chapel of his clinic. The story goes that on the night the Herzog Chapel was destroyed, several men arrived at the clinic with what appeared to be a woman wrapped in white bed sheets. The surgeon met them at the door, pointed to his surgery, and said, 'in there, as quickly as possible.' Then gloved and in his surgeon's gown, he started to remove the sheets, only to be faced, not with a woman requiring instant attention, but with the famous statue of Our Lady. Dr. Lebsche's final admonition to Mother before her release was this: 'Your first trip outside the house must be to the Mother of Mercy, now restored to the rebuilt Herzog Chapel.' She slowly recovered her strength.**
77. While recuperating from surgery Mother Almeda devised the plan to send care packages from larger American houses to larger German houses, etc. providing more equality. (See "Care Packages," **Living in Wartime**, *Sturdy Roots I.*)
78. On April 16, she was declared cured. The "miracle" was attributed to the sisters' prayers and the intercession of Mother Theresa. It was after her cure she decided to take the arduous journey to visit the sisters in America.

Adaptation to Postwar Germany

79. Nine active Bavarian sisters had lost their lives during the war and others had migrated to North and South America, etc.
80. Transfer of superiors every 6 years had not been done and these transfers were very difficult.

Visit to America

81. Nov. 2, 1947 Mother Almeda and S. Sanktina left Bavaria for the flight to New York via Frankfurt through Scotland, Shannon, to New York. This dangerous journey for one weakened with the stress of war and illness was considered vital to thank the American sisters for their loyalty and support and to see all the German sisters in America who were concerned about their families and friends. She couldn't go to Canada because her passport was stamped "U.S. only," even though Canadian authorities would have welcomed her, but the U.S. said no. While in the U.S. Mother Almeda had the opportunity to share experiences of the war, strengthen unity, and foster a more international vision of the Congregation.

Continued Sorrow

82. They returned during Holy Week of 1948. The Berlin Blockade had begun and the Cold War raised further problems for sisters caught in the Russian zone. (See "Berlin," under **Communism** in *Sturdy Roots II*.)
83. Money was scarce and devalued currency was worthless. A Bavarian printer said he would prefer being paid in three large care packages for printing 100,000 small pictures of Mother Theresa rather than receiving worthless German currency.
84. In 1948 she couldn't go to Berlin because of danger and appointed a new provincial by gathering names from older sisters.

American Army Captain Helpful

85. Captain Landeen (Professor) was a U.S. Army gentleman who was instrumental in having sisters return to teach in the local schools immediately after the war. He was "Evangelical" and a noble man.
86. Devalued German mark (decreed by the U.S. Army,) led to hardship, but placed the German economy on a stronger base.

Mother Fidelis' Illness

87. Mother Fidelis' cancer metastasized to her head causing severe headaches. Mother Almeda writes to her mentioning how her suffering is helping the newly founded mission in Japan. (The first SSNDs went to Japan in 1948. See "Asia" under **Expansion** in *Sturdy Roots II*.)
88. **On Dec. 8, 1948, Mother Fidelis presided at the consecration to Mary** in the Milwaukee motherhouse. 1949 the cancer had spread to her lungs. This was particularly upsetting to Mother Almeda because they had become such devoted friends and only after she returned from her visit to the States, did Mother Almeda realize how much pain Mother Fidelis must have experienced during her recent visit to the U.S. Mother Fidelis went into the hospital shortly after Mother Almeda left for Munich.

Celebration

89. Feb. 26, 1949, a celebration was held at the Munich cathedral for Cardinal Faulhaber's 80th birthday. Renovation was not yet complete and "snowflakes fell through the roof onto the prayerful, pious people."
90. On May 26, 1949, the sisters celebrated the 70th birthday of Mother Almeda with a surprise gift: they had collected enough money to buy her a Mercedes so that she could make visitation trips with greater ease.

Plans for a General Chapter

91. Mother Almeda wanted to hold a General Chapter in 1950 and have an election, but Card. Faulhaber thought otherwise.
92. She gave a general dispensation for all failings against the vow of poverty during the war.

Mother Fidelis Dies

93. Nov. 24, 1949, Mother Fidelis died. This was a great loss for Mother Almeda and the congregation.

General Chapter Held

94. General Chapter was held in Munich from March 31 to April 13, 1949. She was re-elected for life, even though she wanted to give authority to younger leaders. Little of importance, by today's standards, was discussed.

Attention to Mary

95. **Dogma of the Assumption named on November 1, 1950. Mother Almeda was back in hospital on Dec. 8, and unable to lead consecration to Mary.**

Visitation

96. During 1951-1952, Mother Almeda visited sisters in troubled areas, recognizing the difficulties of the Cold War and new borders.
97. The Sisters behind the Iron Curtain wrote to her in code for her 25th Jubilee as General Superior. The provincial in Hungary (S. Maria Kornelia) sent a letter to the SSND superior in Stockholm, asking "Linda" (S. Theodolinda) to give the enclosed greetings to "Auntie Meda." The letter read: "Dear Auntie Meda, One cannot forbid the hearts of children to remember the important days in the lives of their parents – you have this past year celebrated the 50th anniversary of your marriage and the 25th of your present position. Through me the entire family greets you with all the cordiality of which we are capable. God bless you for the loyalty with which you have in every way fulfilled your responsible duties. We think of you daily in prayer, beseeching that the Almighty may long preserve you to the consolation and joy of your children and grandchildren. In childlike, loyal love, Lia"

Celebration of 25 years as Superior General

98. Her silver jubilee of election was a joyous event.

Continuing Concerns

99. She was concerned about the beatification cause of Mother Theresa since S. Theopista, the main person involved, had died. She was also worried about sisters in the East-West bloc, and the re-building of the motherhouse and St. James Church.

Honored by German Government

100. Her reception of the Great Service Cross, First Class of the Order of Merit from The Federal Republic of Germany was presented by the President of the Federal Republic, Dr. Theodor Heuss. (At that time the Directory for the Bavarian Province, 1953, lists 2,689 Sisters, 240 Candidates. 100 Sisters are listed for the Motherhouse and 13 Candidates. 41 Novices were at Munich-Au, since there was no room in the motherhouse since it was not rebuilt. 227 Candidates were living at 224 missions.) See "German Award" under **General Superiors** in *Sturdy Roots II*.

Devotion to Mary

101. **Dec. 12, 1954 is a circular on the Marian Year ending and what SSNDs had done to celebrate it. On the tenth anniversary of the destruction of St. James and the Motherhouse there was to be a candle light procession followed by the dedication of a new statue of our Lady, Queen of the Universe.**
102. **Mother Almeda reported that the number of rosaries offered for the Holy Father by Notre Dame Sisters and their students world-wide was 3,626,713!**
103. **Death of Mother Almeda**
104. Dec. 29, 1955 she died. A Munich newspaper wrote of her funeral: "It became an unusually impressive proof of the value placed on this remarkable woman by her own Congregation, by the Church, by officials in public life. The solemn requiem High Mass was offered by Rev. Humbert Fischer of the Cathedral Chapter. The eulogy was given by another member of the chapter, Rev. Simon Irschl, who reviewed Mother's career, ending with this memorable appreciation: 'At the time of this most difficult testing (the defeat of Germany and the loss of the East-bloc countries to Communism) the Superior-General rose to her true stature as she showed herself a leader of the foundation for the reconstruction of the Order and of convent schools in Germany.'" And Cardinal Wendel called her a "woman who was ever ready to do battle for the destiny of her Congregation." Among the many who attended her obsequies as a mark of their gratitude for what she had been or had done for them was the Jesuit provincial, Rev. Augustin Roesch, for whom Mother had at considerable risk provided a "safe house" when the Gestapo was on his trail.

Words of Mother Almeda

- 105. Mother Almeda had said, “If you station yourself beneath the cross, every spot on earth will offer you a home and harbor of peace.”**

Final note of S. Anne Winkelmann, SSND

Mother Almeda’s role in opening missions that greatly enhanced the internationality of the Congregation is suggested as the topic for an entire book. S. Anne suggested that after Mother Theresa and Mother Caroline, Mother Almeda’s life and work should be studied as an outstanding School Sister of Notre Dame.