

Collection of the Letters of Blessed Mother Theresa Gerhardinger  
S. Henriette Hoene, SSND  
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This is a transcript of a spontaneous presentation in which S. Henriette Hoene described how the letters of Mother Theresa were discovered, copied, and translated.

An introduction to S. Henriette Hoene was given by S. Judy Best at a Heritage Workshop on the history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1979. The audio is available as well as the text of her presentation.

S. Judy Best: "I'd like to move now to what I had asked Sister Henriette to do and I think that part of the reason we can say these things (quote from the letters of Mother Theresa) is because we have heard from our own foundress, her vision. I'd like Sister Henriette to share what you'd like to share (on) how the letters came to be.

S. Henriette: I think that Sister Judy is true to her word. We need a sense of humor. Last night she asked me if I would do this. This morning she prayed for all those who work without getting recognition.

Needless to say, the things I'd like to have in my hand are not with me, but I'll try to give you a very brief summary and perhaps I'll start out with the shocking statement to say that the original letters of Mother Theresa were destroyed in the bombing of the Munich Motherhouse in 1944 and this was done by American soldiers. But fortunately, and there's no complaint from the Germans because we liberated the Germans from the Nazis, so it's all right. But that's what happened to the letters.

And so for a long time there has been confusion in the congregation as to how could we follow the dictates of Vatican II to return to the spirit of our founders. Fortunately, some people in the community were better informed to remember that years ago there was an account given which stated that the work for the canonization and beatification of Mother Theresa had begun and during that time the novices had been asked to make copies in handwriting of the letters of Mother Theresa. And these were done very carefully, packed together and delivered to Rome personally by Cardinal Faulhaber which some of you may remember as a name that often occurred in our table reading. That was done in December 1929. And so since that time the work for the canonization of Mother Theresa has been in progress. (process)

At the Chapter of 1968, I don't know what happened too much in between time, but in the Chapter of 1968 Vatican II had already taken place, and we were urged to return to the spirit of our founders. Soon after that, being in Rome, there were meetings among religious communities of sisters who were interested in writing the lives of their founders. I remember particularly one time there was a young sister there who said this: "The reason we're so interested in getting letters of our founders is because as the history of the congregation continues the story about the founders is doctored by the people, I mean

is affected, by the different people who repeat it. We don't want to know what the sisters have thought about our founders in the past, we want to know what the founder herself said. So that would mean in trying to go to the letters she wrote."

S. Mary Hester Valentine was one person who was always asking that something would be done to try to get copies of the letters. Formation personnel were meeting and were trying to revise the program of formation. They said, "Well, we would have to know the charism or the spirit of our foundress and how can we know this if the books that are written are not really authentic all the way down the line." There were many requests. After we were in Rome I'm sure there were other things we had to take care of so that we almost forgot, too. But sometime during that first or second year S. Henrica (Schmidter) did find out that the letters were in Rome at the Casa Sancta Dei which is a particular part of the Vatican where people assemble to work on causes for the beatification for various saints. But whomever she consulted she was told that in no way would we be able to have access to these letters.

And so there was one period in my life, about 1970 I suppose, where I questioned as to what kind of leadership I could exert for the congregation, and I was a little bit discouraged. But then I thought that maybe I could work on that, to see if something could be done because you heard so often that these letters were needed. So one day I asked and the Council said "Sure, anybody could do it."

So bravely I called Monsignor Wasner who is the postulator for the cause for the beatification for Mother Theresa. Some of you may remember him as the German priest who accompanied the Trapp family when they made their tour of the United States. So we arranged for a meeting with him and I took S. Aquina (Tilgner), a German-speaking councilor along, We sat there for about an hour and he convinced us that these letters were like reference books in a library and that they were needed for the cause of the beatification and in no way could they be ours until after (the) cause for beatification was complete. So we went home that day and I really don't know what happened in the next few months.

I went back to the telephone one day, evidently after there had been another letter, maybe a report of a meeting by the formation personnel, which still pleaded and indicated that we needed these letters. So I called Monsignor Wasner by phone. He said, "Would you explain to me again why the American sisters want these letters." And I said, "Vatican II said that we should return to the spirit of our founders. Formation programs are being revamped so that they would be in accord with the spirit of the founders. If we don't have any written material with which to work, how can we do this?"

He said, "I'll see what I can do".

And so thinking that for a long time I wouldn't hear from him again I didn't say anything to the community. But the next day I get a telephone call saying that if you want to see those letters meet me in front of the Casa Sancta Dei tomorrow morning at 8:30. There wasn't any German councilor at home and I don't speak German that well, but Mother

Georgianne (Segner) was willing to go and S. Clementa (Abel) was willing to go, and the three of us went. We go into this mysterious-looking building, we meet some mysterious people, and finally we get in touch with Monsignor (Orazio) Cocchetti, who is Italian and the kindest person you would ever want to meet. He was more than willing to take us to where he thought these letters might be. So we follow him through corridors, through passageways, through steps, down to a basement which would be under the main street right in front of the Vatican there, probably. And with a feather duster he goes to the old library shelves and we find four packages wrapped carefully in brown paper and carefully marked Theresa Gerhardinger. He had on a dust coat and he was afraid that we would get dusty and dirty. We couldn't care, and finally he had them out on the table.

We opened them very quickly and they began with 1822 and they ended with 1879. So we were sure that this is what we were looking for and so we started to open up the packages and find the letter of 1847 to see if it had anything in there about going to America. Of course we found it, and we were just about in that position when something unusual happened that usually doesn't happen in the Vatican. The lights went out. Here we were in that dark basement, no chairs to sit on, when the lights went out! Monsignor kindly asked us please to remain quiet, not to be afraid, and he would go after a light. So he goes for, I think matches. He comes back after ten-fifteen minutes with matches. Of course the matches don't last very long, and the lights weren't on yet so he burns a little bit of paper and of course that went up like smoke and that is not a very safe thing to do in a library. He realized he had not made a good choice so out he goes again and we wait there and this time he found some chaplain and came back with two church candles. He had left the matches with Mother Georgianne, and he comes in with church candles in the dark. The two couldn't find one another in the dark well enough because the matches were in one person's hand and the candles were in the other, and it was really so dark that you couldn't tell figures. Well, finally we got the match and the candle together and just at that time the lights went on! So he wanted to know if we were content and he assured us that we could stay as long as we wanted to stay.

Mother Georgianne had her camera with her and she quickly took some pictures in case we would never get down to this place again. We looked at them and we were satisfied with what we found, but the job was entirely too big. So going home, S. Clementa and I volunteered to go there since we couldn't take them out. We would go and translate. Just imagine, common sense, 5333 German letters! But we began and we soon realized that if we worked from 9:00 in the morning until 1:30 when they would close up we would have very little accomplished. And so we thought we better try something else.

We asked Monsignor Cocchetti, who was very obliging all the time, since we couldn't take the letters out, could we bring our copy machine in there. And he thought that that could be arranged. We thought if we could make copies of these letters we could have sisters come to Rome to do the translating during the summer time or some other way. In the whole process of setting that up the plugs didn't work and a few other things, but finally we had that set up. A few of the sisters from the Generalate would go all morning and make copies of the letters with this 3-M machine. The paper we were using at that (time) cost about 10 cents a sheet. We were using more copies, the copies were not

satisfactory and we just didn't know if we would get people to translate this. So we talked about quitting, at least for the time being. At that time we were getting ready for the Chapter of 1972 remotely and we had talked about getting a photocopy machine. We thought since we do have to get a new machine anyway, the paper would be cheaper and the copies would be better. So in buying that machine, maybe instead of having it delivered to the Generalate we could have it delivered to the Vatican, and use it there first. So in a very nice way we told Monsignor we probably would not be back tomorrow and he said, "May I ask why?" And I said, "The paper we are using is a little expensive, and the copies are not too clear, and we think that probably the Generalate is getting a new machine and we think it is better to use that". He said, "May I ask you how much you are paying for the paper?" And I told him, and he said for that price I could have them xeroxed for you and that would include the paper and the work but since there are 5333 letters and many of them are ten pages long it will be an expense." I said that I have the word from the congregation at large that no matter what the cost is, it has been said many times, we want the copies of these letters. But I said, at your word I will consult the Council again. So we talked about it and said we do want this done. So that was a big relief.

That summer S. Caritas (Krieter) who is 85 years old, something like that, and was still teaching full-time in high school, did give up one summer to translate, and she was in that room from 8:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the afternoon and was very careful of how much time she took off but at the end of the summer there was very little work done.

Then we got the idea to write to each province to ask if they had any older sisters who might be retired who still would know enough German who could translate this German letter which luckily was not written in the German script, which Mother Theresa's would have been but in the Latine script, (you know in letters such as we would write), so that our sisters could read them. We did get a long list of volunteers and I'd ask you to look at Volume One (names of translators given at end of this presentation) at some time to see the names of these sisters, many of whom are already deceased. If we hadn't done it then it would be too late now.

But we got a contact person for each province and it meant packing these letters very carefully by the year, sending them across the ocean, hoping they wouldn't drop in the ocean, and then when they got finished with them making sure they would return them to the Generalate, (postage and all you would never know), and then there would be pages of English translation, some of them would be in long-hand writing in notebooks, some of them would be typed out if they had found somebody else who would be willing to type.

The work was tedious but in the EC in Canada of 1971 we sent over a whole boxful of letters by freight and then Sister Mary Luke (Baldwin,) and Mother (Georgianne) were at that EC and so they distributed them to the provinces that had said they would be willing. But to keep track of all that, to see where the letters went! And then, at the beginning, Sister Mary Hester (Valentine) had asked that they be doubly translated so that we would have an accurate translation. Now we did that until most of the translators said "We can't

do any more.” By that time we had fewer translators and we knew that their translations were accurate and so that was discontinued.

Then Sister Mary Hester in trying to get this finished had gotten released from Mount Mary for a year to do this but she caught up, (she had time off) but the letters she needed to edit weren't translated yet so then you had to appeal to all the provinces: Couldn't they find somebody else who could help with this translation because it wasn't going fast enough. Then the Lord took care of it and Sister Mary Hester got sick and had to take a bed rest for a year or so or a couple months and the sisters got caught up with the translation and finally we put it all together.

After they were translated we still had to find somebody who would type it and then how to reproduce it. At that time some of the General Council came to St. Louis and we made our plea and they gave us Sister Paulissa (Klaas) who really typed from 8:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the afternoon. She was a good typist and a fast typist but to get a good typewriter and good ribbon you would never know what we went through. Then what would we do about binding it, how many copies would we want? So we came to an EC somewhere in the East, Baltimore or Wilton and that was decided among the provinces. At that time Sister Ambrosia, one of the councilors from Baltimore, agreed that she would handle the work with the man, not the printer but some man who would make the copies. The work seemed so big and the pages so many that at that time I think we made the provinces ask for about three copies of five volumes each. Now we suffer from the fact that not enough copies are available. They are in the Motherhouse, maybe in the formation wing and maybe in the home for the aged sisters and if you could find another copy in the province you were lucky.

The day that Monsignor called to say that we could come down to look at the letters was January 26, 1971 and the Canadian EC took place that summer and so the real work of translation began then. I think it was about 1975 that most of the work was turned over to the printer and I don't remember exactly when these books first came out but I think that some of them were brought to the Chapter of 1974. Some of the volumes were completed, maybe volumes 1 and 2, but the work continued.

Now I know that is not put together as well as I'd like to, but that's all that occurs to me at this time

Question: Who collected Mother Theresa's letters to all these people to whom she wrote?

Response: That was part of the process for the beatification. You see that the German bishops would have to do that. When they first begin the process for the beatification it's done on the local level so it would be the bishops of the area who would have written to bishops in the United States. Somebody said that that was under the penalty of excommunication: that if you had a letter and would not turn it in that's how severe that call is to have it all collected.

Much of that is in the first volume of the letters, especially the names of the sisters from the different provinces. We wanted to be sure that some sister's name is in there who maybe translated one letter and another sister's name is in there and maybe she translated 2300. We had no way of knowing, but we had to give them recognition. We checked the lists with the provinces and they didn't know either. It was a work of generosity, and sometimes you had two people working together and maybe being able to translate one letter. Sometimes the provinces took the letters and said it's not worth doing, it's all business matter. Sometimes they took it and said, that kind of German is not used at all anymore today, we can't even find a dictionary that has those words. So it wasn't easy. Some of our sisters that did most of the translations were still on full time duty in high school and used their summer vacations and their free time. Like I say, if we would begin the work today I doubt if we could find that many sisters still alive and still able to do it today.

Just this past summer Sister Irmengard died. She was a sister in the Wilton province who had the opportunity to study in the Munich University and knew German real well. She was handicapped, she was a wheel-chair patient but she was strong mentally and in body quite well too, and had no other occupation, so she could do a lot more than someone else that was on full-time duty. But we give credit to them all.

Question: (Who were the translators from St. Louis?)

Response: Sister Augustine, Sister Pietro, Mother Theodosia, Sister DeSales. Sister Francis Borgia should get a lot of credit not because she translated but because she would receive the letters and give them out to these sisters. So that they wouldn't get a pack this big and die at just the sight of it, she would give them three letters, and when they would get them finished she would put them away and maybe give them two more, always just kind of urging them on. Sister Aloyne Reinert, Sister Augustine Hammand, Sister DeSales Messmer, Sister Ethelbert Dekem, Sister Frances Borgia Stauder, Sister Gerlinda Christl, Sister Joesetta Merstensmeyer, Sister Paula Buckheim, Sister Pietro Kampling, Sister Reginald Helmsing.

We had lost one letter. When they were all returned we were missing one. They later found it on Sister Pietro's desk after she had died. It was an unfinished work and in cleaning up someone didn't discover it soon enough and so we had already gone back to the Casa Sancta Dei to get another copy made of that one. But it did come back so in all the hazardous crossing of the ocean and sending it by mail (and the mail in Italy is terrible at times), giving them to people who were traveling across the ocean, that big stack of letters went back and forth.

And as Sister Mary Hester writes, "And for Mother Theresa Gerhardinger without whom neither the letters nor the congregation would exist, we thank God."

Question: How far is the beatification? (The beatification took place on Nov. 15, 1985, so this response predates the beatification)

Response: Now you would have to know the different steps in the process of beatification but after they have been reviewed and people who have been engaged to study this process feel that she was really virtuous and it is possible that she would become a saint, would write that up and say that. And for each one there is an appointed devil's advocate who is to review everything that's written and prove the opposite: "Now I found this in her life and therefore she could never be a saint." And so during our term in office the devil's advocate finished his work. Then we had to refute the devil's advocate with a lawyer's help. Dante is the one who is working on the cause. But see the letters are written in German, the cause is being handled in Italian. So when the devil's advocate wrote it in Italian we had to get that translated into German and English and then get some people to go through the life and help Dante to refute that again and say: "Yes, you say because she put Mother Caroline in the guesthouse she could never be a saint..." then you have to explain the historical background for that and get somebody to translate it and it is a little farther than that right now but it's not dead.

(S. Judy Best) Isn't that amazing! Really thanks, Sister Henriette for all you did. I mean it's great!

That's right. If not we wouldn't have them.