

SR. FERDINANDA HOELZER, OSB

MANILA PRIORY'S FIRST Prioress



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INTRODUCTION

This is the first month of our Centennial Year and we have decided to focus on the foremothers of our Priory throughout this year hoping to learn from them and to be inspired how to live our Missionary Benedictine calling in the context of our world today, just as they lived it in their time.

It is but fitting that we begin with the leader of the Founding Team that gave birth to our Priory who became our first Prioress—Sr. Ferdinandanda Hoelzer, OSB

I can just imagine Sr. Ferdinandanda leaning over the rails of the SS. Gneisenau bound for Hongkong, where she and her 4 other companions would take another ship that would bring them to their destination—Manila, Philippines. As she looked at the sea glistening in the moonlight, she must have felt both excitement and trepidation, confidence as well as a sense of inadequacy at being chosen to lead the band of pioneers that would start the mission in the Philippines. She must have looked back at her childhood when she had no inkling that she would be making a journey to the ends of the earth!

LIFE JOURNEY OF SR. FERDINANDA

Early Years as a Religious

Anna Hoelzer was born in Düsseldorf of a very good Catholic Family. At the age of 20, she entered the Poor Clares but left due to poor health. She then joined the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in St. Ottilien and received the name, Sr. Ferdinandanda. Recognizing her potentials, her Superiors sent her for further training in Nursing and afterwards bookkeeping and other practical courses. Her first important office was as Novice Mistress and Sister Baptista Battig was one of the novices she was privileged to guide.

Pioneer and Prioress

When the decision was made to found a mission in the Philippines in 1906, she was chosen to lead the pioneers as Sister Prioress. Sr. Caridad, in the history of our Priory, describes the personality of Sr. Ferdinanda thus:

Mother Ferdinanda was a woman of rare abilities, friendly and winsome. She was described as one with deep, penetrating look; of stately figure and very pale; courteous and with charming manners but also exacting in her demands. She knew how to give a “beautiful and dignified appearance” to things plain and poor, as she did in directing the transformation of a horse stable into a chapel worthy of the Lord. From what has already been told of what the Sisters went through as they sought the Will of God in their call and response, giving due consideration to the character and culture of the Filipinos and of the “changed situation” in the country, one can infer the stature of this rare woman in the society where she had chosen to take her place, in obedience and in love. (p.82)

Because of the great need of the new mission, it was decided in January, 1911 that Sr. Ferdinanda would go to the United States to ask help accompanied by Sr. Xaveria who was to learn English with the Benedictine Sisters of Atchison, Kansas. Then she went to the Motherhouse to consult with Mother Birgitta, who seemed not to have received the communication about the trip and was not too pleased with it. However, Mother Birgitta saw the great opportunity of sending Sisters to Atchison for education and so 4 postulants went with Sr. Ferdinanda back to the US. Sr. Ferdinanda continued her “begging” tour and she came home with Sr. Xaveria in March, 1912.

This long trip was her last act as Prioress, because her term was ending. But she still had the joy of receiving the vows of the First Filipina Sisters: Sr. Maura Alcala and Sr. Placida Haraza. She was succeeded by Sr. Angela Boedeker. Sr. Ferdinanda became Superior of Albay. After her term, she was called upon to make a new foundation in Opon, Cebu.

A Call Within A Call

She did all these pioneering work with great success, but deep in her heart, she had a longing to be a contemplative, having tasted this life as a Poor Clare novice earlier on. With the help of Bishop McGinley, she would realize her desire.

Even in joining the Carmelites, she had again to be a pioneer joining the new foundation of Bishop James McCloskey of Carmelites in Jaro, Iloilo. Ecclesiastical permissions for her transfer were sought and obtained. The four French nuns who would be her companions in this foundation came to Manila and stayed at St. Scholastica’s welcomed by Mother Clodesindis, who was by this time (1923) the Prioress of Manila. Sr. Ferdinanda was again instrumental in the foundation of the first Carmel in the Philippines. The fateful day of November 6, 1923 was later on recorded in 1941 by the Prioress of Carmel who was eyewitness of the event:

Solemn hour! Her whole past life was dying away and silently falling into God’s mystery. A new, unknown life was before her, a life certainly desired for a long time, which however, could not be embraced without a universal and absolute sacrifice. As the boat was leaving, the Mother Provincial of the Benedictines was on the deck when a beautiful rainbow appeared suddenly and

clearly in the sky and the last word which reached the ears of our dear Sister from her former superior was “PAX”. Yes, “PAX” to her, who had been for her community a mother, a Sister, a Friend.”(Sr. Mary of Christ, Obituary of Sr. Agnes, p.2)

From Ferdinanda to Agnes

In a simple but touching ceremony on November, 1923, Sr. Ferdinanda received the Carmelite habit and the name Sr. Agnes of the Assumption. She was then forty-eight years old. At the end of the year of noviceship, she made her Perpetual Profession. She became sacristan and infirmarian. She was admired for her zeal, her asceticism and her “talent to prepare surprises, songs, pious representations and innocent fun to give joy to the Community”(Sr. Mary of Christ, p. 4) In 1931, the Sister celebrated her 25 years of religious life in the Philippines. The next year she was elected to the office of Subprioress, for which she had composed beforehand a welcome song not knowing she would sing it to herself. Some years later the charge of Assistant of the Novitiate was added to her task.

It was not all sweetness and light for Sr. Agnes. Later on in life, especially during her illness, she suffered some dark nights of the soul.

Sr. Mary of Christ writes of the “shadows”:

First of all, her idealistic aspirations rendered her so restless at times that she became almost unjust, sharp and bitter, then she would regret the past or desire a new surrounding; strong temptations of changing would assail her and her soul was plunged in darkness; at times in our Carmel, then in its foundation, there was not enough place for contemplation; at other times Carmel did not offer her enough activity. Then it was very hard for her to wait were it for a cup of broth in sickness or for a work to be done. If a remedy did not give at once the desired improvement, a second one had to be taken, without delay, and if this one did not give relief, then a third, and so on. We all know that those things cannot be helped in this life and as long as we are ‘in via’ we have to expect them within us and with those around us. (p. 6)

Last Days

Since 1938, it was evident that in spite of her energy, that Sister Agnes was weakening. She had acute anemia and had to take a long rest. Then she suffered from hemorrhage that alarmed the community. She was given the Last Sacraments in May, 1939 and from that time on she had to live almost entirely apart from community life. In April 1941, she had an accident which rendered her invalid. She again received the Last Sacraments on October 12. It seems that after this she regained her peace of soul:

It was truly the beautiful evening of a life wholly spent in God’s service...Her love of God and every virtue shone wonderfully during this period. Fully conscious till the end, her beautiful intelligence, her energy, her moral qualifications were centered on one thing. .. Her joy, peace, childlike innocence were delightful to us all. How often she repeated, “ the goodness of God, the goodness of God, it is all pure mercy. (P.7)

Finally after 12 days and nights of great suffering, on November 12, 1941, she died with the promise: “Let me go, I will send you joy.” (p. 8)