

SISTER GODEHARDA VOELKER, OSB



by Sister Mary Bernard Lansang, OSB

Sister Godeharda: an Educator, a Disciplinarian

“Ladies, a reminder: When you hear the first bell, walk to your line; . . . second bell: SILENCE; third bell: go to your classroom, 2 by 2, in silence . . . lift your feet as you ascend the steps.”

That was Sister Godeharda, addressing us, the entire high school body at Assumption Academy, San Fernando, Pampanga (now, St. Scholastica’s Academy, San Fernando). She stood before the assembly in the quadrangle of the school and managed to make her voice heard without a microphone . . . to us, young girls, Sister Godeharda stood tall, poised and strong! A Westphalian sister in command . . .!

Such was the standard disciplinary routine in school. Coming from a small school in Sta. Rita, this new order of behavior escaped me. One day, our class was going down for recess. Not used to the regimentation in this “colegio,” I started talking with my partner. Sister Godeharda, Directress, clapped her hands and called out, “Silence! . . . Who was talking?” I kept mum and pretended innocence. Emphatically, Sister repeated, “Honest! Who was talking?” Then, the verdict came: “Consuelo, see me in my office this afternoon!”

Early that afternoon, I went to the Office of the Directress in fear and trembling. There was Sister Godeharda. . . she spoke just one sentence: Consuelo, here in this school, you have to be honest!” Tears ran down my cheeks . . . this was something new . . . I felt lost. Sister stood and placed her arms around my shoulder and said, “Courage! You will do better next time . . .”

That was Sister Godeharda! German Benedictine discipline personified! Soon, I learned from the sisters the art of self-discipline: jumping out of bed at the sound of the bell, being punctual for lining up for Holy Mass, punctual for meals, punctual for the study time in the study room, and many more things. Above all . . . HONESTY AND TRUTHFULNESS!

Walking around the school grounds or along corridors, Sister kept an eye on order and cleanliness. She would pick up pieces of paper or candy wrappers lying around. Students who saw her would get up and follow suit. Thus, without a word, she instilled in us care for our surroundings.

Alumnae and sisters who lived with her cherish fond memories of Sister Godeharda:

“Wherever she was, whether as a plain classroom teacher or an administrator, Sister Godeharda was a fascinating figure. When she addressed an assembly of students gathered in the playground or in the gym, she raised both hands, palms toward the spectators. She cupped her hands near her mouth (microphones were rarely used in our schools during the early years of her teaching). Her voice traveled through nature’s graceful loud speaker . . . and somehow, her message got through. In the classroom, she demanded full attention. She never shouted nor scolded . . . She was such a perfect disciplinarian.”

Sister Godeharda on Stage

In San Fernando and in St. Agnes Academy, Legaspi, St. Benedict’s Academy, Guinobatan, Sister Godeharda’s name was equated with drama . . . oration. . . declamation. Many medals and trophies garnered at the BACS Meet (Bicol Association of Catholic Schools) were partly due to the enthusiasm and support of the faculty and sisters especially Sister Godeharda. I had the fortune of having been trained by Sister in declamation. Sister would make me stand on stage and she would stand at the farthest corner of the hall (the size of three classrooms) training me to project my voice so that without a microphone, words would get across, loud, clear and distinct. Then, I would start: “Bells by Edgar Allan Poe.” With a motion of the hands, a tilt of the head, a sway of the body, Sister would model to me effective ways of delivering a literary piece.

Tirelessly, she would coach drama members with sustained interest and enthusiasm. Only much later did I discover that Sister Godeharda, prior to her being sent on mission to the Philippines, was sent to London for intensive training in English. That, to me, is a revelation of what mission meant to our early foremothers in our congregation.

Sister Godeharda Molding Young Minds and Hearts

At that time in the 1950’s we did not yet talk about inter-disciplinary approach to education; yet as Sister taught us religion, physics and good manners and right conduct in our senior year, I felt a certain integration happening within me. Sister made us read stories from a simplified biblical story book (in the 1950’s we did not have Bible for our use.) We memorized some passages and recited them like pieces of poetry: “I am the vine, you are the branches . . . without me you can do nothing.” “And I, if I be lifted up, I will draw all things to myself.” If you wish to have life, take up my cross and follow me.” Later on, as a sister, I realized that what I learned from our class with Sister Godeharda (and, of course, from all the other sisters) have greatly influenced my life.

Diminishments . . .

All through our school days in San Fernando and later, as a college student in the University of Sto. Tomas, where I met Agnesians, my classmates and I saw Sister Godeharda up on a pedestal.

We would talk about Sister, singing her praises, recalling some achievements in school and we would extol the merits and excellence of Sister Godeharda. We were all proud of her.

Later on, as a young perpetually professed sister, I had the opportune moment to see the other side of Sister Godeharda. Sister and I worked together in our school in Bacolod for one school year. Based from my past experience of her, I had high expectations of Sister Godeharda. To my surprise, her efforts in drama and in discipline were not so much appreciated as they were in Pampanga and in Bicol. I helped her in administrative work and I saw how Sister was slowing down in her pace at work. I also saw with my own eyes some moments of dejection and rejection from one or the other sister or lay partner, and yet, she never, never talked against people, not even against those who must have hurt her sensibilities. Somehow, I felt pain and disappointment written on her face. It was during those times that I saw how Sister spent time in prayer.

“Bloody but unbowed!”

Despite the disappointment that she must have felt, Sister stayed on the line of duty with unflinching courage and undaunted commitment. That year, the SSC alumnae of Bacolod raised funds to open a vocational school in Sum-ag. In collaboration with the Federal Republic of Germany, our sisters and the alumnae worked for the opening of Holy Family Vocational High School. Sister Godeharda, with her usual thoroughness and commitment, worked out papers to obtain permit to open a school. She looked after the completion of laboratory equipment, library holdings, trying to meet the requirements with exactness and precision. In due time, the documents for permit and approval were awarded to us.

Sister Godeharda, a Formator

Sister Godeharda was called to Manila to serve as Novitiate Directress. Sister Beatrice recalls two incidents that reveal the inner spirit of Sister Godeharda. The daily horarium for the novitiate had a slot of 15 minutes for Scripture reading (that time, the term *lectio* was not yet used.) Sister Beatrice (then, Dolores) complained “Sister I did not study the Bible in my college years, much less in the high school.” Quietly, in a very assuring manner, Sister Godeharda responded, “Let the Word of God speak to you.”

On the day of their initiation into canonical novitiate, only the parents and immediate family members were present. An announcement was made. “We would like to inform parents and close family members that for a whole year, the novices may not be visited!” Deeply saddened by this announcement, Sister Beatrice’ mother hugged her daughter tightly and started to sob. Drawn tightly to her mother, Sister Beatrice, started to cry. Sister Godeharda spoke strongly, “Dolores, you are now Sister Beatrice!” Immediately Sister Beatrice unlocked herself from her mother’s tight embrace. On the first day of her canonical novitiate, Sister Beatrice learned the meaning of “leaving behind one’s parents and loved ones.”

Sister Godeharda’s Family: The Roots of Her Religious Spirit

The obituary written about Sister Godeharda throws light on her strong religious spirit. There must have been a strong religious atmosphere in the family of Bernhard Voelker and Maria Loewemann. Two days after the birth of their child the couple had her baptized and the name

Gertrud was given to the child. After having finished her course in the Normal School, Gertrud entered the convent in Tutzing to become a missionary Benedictine Sister. Her own sister followed her and was given the name Sister Gerburg Voelker, OSB. Sister Gerburg served the mission in Africa and later retired in Haus Benedikt.

The Last Years of Sister Godeharda's Life

Sister Godeharda's retirement years were spent in our convent in Baguio. She was in charge of the Christian Children's Fund. With some financial assistance from the Diocese of Cologne, Sister was able to organize some home industries for the Igorot women.

Later, on she suffered a stroke and slowly her health deteriorated. Those who attended to her recall how quietly Sister suffered her illness, making no demands, obeying the instructions from the infirmarian and caregivers. The writer of her obituary states, "The secret of her being a disciplinarian lay in her own self-discipline." Until the end, she lived out what she taught her students, "to take up the Cross." Sister Godeharda remained close to God in sickness and in pain. Strongly and courageously, she embraced Christ's cross for the life of the world.

Conclusion:

Much of what is written on this paper comes from my own experience of Sister Godeharda. It seems, as a young girl, I saw Sister as "a tall, towering figure of strength and grace." But when I grew up and walked side by side with her, I realized that she was not that "tall;" she had her own limits and her shadows. But it is in this context that I saw the reality of human existence: our strength and our vulnerabilities. And I have seen how God can work out his plans in a person, so human, so vulnerable. In the many facets of Sister Godeharda's life, God had made her an instrument in shaping the hearts and minds of young women . . . women open to God, ecclesial women serving God in His people!