



Mother M. Clodesindis Lüken, OSB
1880 – 1942

PRIORY OF MANILA, REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES

When Scholasticans hear Mother Clodesindis' name mentioned, they think right away of the Sister who died with a child in her arms, in the Sacred Heart Courtyard of St. Agnes' Academy during the bombardment of the city in World War II. This was, of course, not all which made the life of Mother Clodesindis remarkable, but it is what stuck on the mind, and in a way, symbolized her life of offering oneself for others.

Clara was born the seventh child in Dortmund on August 8, 1880. One lung not functioning, she was in a precarious condition and for years her health continued to be below par. This did not prevent her, however, from being cheerful and vivacious. Gifted in many ways, she breezed through examinations with playful ease. She was also musical and studied piano and violin.

As early as her teens she wanted to become a missionary. But her father would not hear of her leaving the country; so she accepted a teaching position in an institute for the deaf in Beuron in order to bide time. She was an excellent teacher.

In 1901, she traveled secretly to St. Ottilien to apply in person for admission into the Congregation of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters. However, it was only after her father's death that she could actually enter. Convent life was not easy for a person of Clara's temperament and upbringing. She had been trained for mental work, for the arts and sciences, and she was independent-minded. Now, she found plenty of manual labor, and relaxations were rare.

On the Feast of the Presentation, 1908, Clara received the habit and the name Sister Clodesindis. The following year she pronounced her first vows. As she had excelled in methods of teaching, she was assigned to teach in the convent school.

In 1916, Sister Clodesindis and Sr. Pia, together with two postulants, were assigned as war nurses to Mesopotamia. In three years of military nursing service they matured more than if they had remained in a quiet convent under ordinary circumstances in a longer span of time. Traveling through war zones in a carriage drawn by mules up the 5000 m of the Taurus, in imminent danger of gliding into a ravine where birds of prey were feasting on carcasses; passing through fields studded with skulls of Armenians slaughtered by Turks, and balancing oneself in a wagon drawn by donkeys that could slip any moment down the slopes and disappear from the face of the earth, meant being ready to die any moment. Having no clean water to drink and to wash themselves with, huddling together for mutual protection, sleeping in soldiers' barracks, in deserted stables, in the open—how different from even the severest practices in the peaceful convent.

The sisters had to fight diseases. In fact, both sisters got so sick that they were advised to return to Germany to recuperate. Sr. Clodesindis also had to fight military and civil officials who wanted to be served at mess. Sister had a ready answer: "You have your lackies and orderlies. The High Command commissioned us to serve the common soldiers." When the officer-in-charge reprimanded her for wanting to be in his place, she replied: "The cock is in command in the poultry yard. He struts around. The hen has the right to cackle. She does not want to be the master."



The most dangerous situation that faced the sisters came from the Pasha who invited them once to an entertainment and insinuated that one of them should stay behind with him. Sister Clodesindis fearlessly explained to him that they were espoused to Allah, which struck fear into the heart of the sensuous man, and he countered with professing his faith in the Supreme God.

When peace returned, the sisters received orders to go home. The soldiers, however, begged them to stay to protect them from the maltreatment of their officers. So they remained until the soldiers were ready to move. When they finally reached Constantinople, they learned that of the one hundred cars which had left the war-torn territory in a convoy, theirs alone had reached its destination without mishap.

Sister Clodesindis was appointed Visitatrix in 1920 and led 14 other sisters to the Philippines. They had to board the steamer in Barcelona. Knowing no Spanish, Sister Clodesindis, in asking a policeman the whereabouts of a church, simply sang "Dominus vobiscum" and the enlightened policeman showed them the way to the nearest church. The devaluation of the German money left them with less than they needed to buy their tickets. Sr. Clodesindis approached one consulate after another. Finally, Princess Maria de la Paz, sister of the King of Spain and wife of Prince Ludwig-Ferdinand of Bavaria, arranged with the shipping company to accommodate the sisters on credit, which Mother Angela, on their arrival, lost no time in settling.

As Visitatrix and later on as Mother Prioress, she studied the condition of the country in depth and came to the conclusion that religious instruction was the greatest need in the Philippines, and that schools would be necessary to cope with the situation. Procuring more sisters from the Motherhouse in the years from 1920 to 1926, she was able to put up in quick succession ten schools all over the country, even as far as Camiguin Islands! She also set up a program of in-service training, and she herself took time to show the sisters how to teach. Aside from this, she also trained catechists for parishes and public schools and institutions, and introduced vacation missions.

The General Chapter of 1927 elected Mother Clodesindis as prioress general. On her travels, she would ask her companions to call her "Sister Maria", so as not to disclose her position. She always yielded her seat to a nursing mother, a pregnant woman, or one who was not well. She also made use of traveling time, as on one occasion, she gave her young companions a lesson on Proverbs 31. A fellow traveler, the Princess of Saxony, was so interested that Mother Clodesindis had to give her added explanation. Prince or pauper—she treated all alike; she neither disdained the poor nor bowed to the mighty.

She also had a rare insight into people, as when she told a novice struggling through her "dark night": "You are in doubt whether you should remain with us or enter a contemplative convent. I can tell you, this is a temptation you have to overcome."

At the visitations, Mother Clodesindis invariably looked into the health of the sisters, their prayer life, their observance of charity and their spirit of silence. She felt that when these points were in order, whatever apostolate they were engaged in would prosper. With characteristic wisdom she writes in one of her chronicles: "The charitable organizations do very much, but it is a pity that

everything is over organized in minute details and, consequently, love has grown cold with many. But there is nothing more important than personal contact with the poor. Visits to their huts are indispensable and more potent than hours of statistical work in a bureau. Not in vain does our Holy Rule say: 'A good word is above the best gift.' The poor and sick love to get some encouragement in their hard hours of suffering."

In 1931 she had the joy to visit her beloved Philippines, and at the General Chapter of 1933 she was reassigned as prioress of Manila, to the great joy of the sisters, students, and friends. Important events occurred during this time. In 1935 the Philippine Commonwealth was inaugurated. Mother Clodesindis presented a copy of the Holy Rule to President Manuel Quezon, convinced that if he would follow its principles, his administration would be successful. For the International Eucharistic Congress in 1937, she set aside some quarters of the school to accommodate the sisters' relatives and foreign priests. At the blessing of St. Hildegard's in 1938, to which Vice President Sergio Osmena was invited, the latter remarked, "If Mother were to run as mayor of Manila, she would easily win!"

One of Mother Clodesindis' greatest achievements, if not the greatest, was the fostering of native vocations. When she first arrived in the Philippines, there was only one perpetually professed sister. During her first term as prioress, eight professed sisters were added. On her second term, she redoubled her efforts at collecting "human stones" to build the ecclesiola of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines. Her breadth of view, her understanding of the Philippine psychology softened for many Filipinas the difficulty of adjusting to a predominantly German community. See Christ in everybody and under every circumstance, Mother Clodesindis was available to take everybody inside the convent and outside. According to Sister Withburga, Mother Clodesindis was ingenious in relieving all kinds of misery, and that it was impossible to cite all the charitable undertakings she was engaged in.

After her term of office as prioress, she was assigned as superior to Legaspi. With a narrower scope of responsibility, Mother Clodesindis could attend personally to whoever might need her attention. She taught some classes, instructed lepers in religion and comforted them in many ways.

On December 21, 1941, the Japanese invaders landed at Legaspi City. Shortly after, they wanted to occupy St. Agnes. Politely but firmly, Mother answered, "This is a school. Besides, Germany and Japan are allies. So you cannot take the school." It was her personality rather than her logic that caused the Japanese to withdraw. As the underground movement was active, many suspected guerillas were arrested and tortured. At the risk of her own life, Mother Clodesindis would plead for their lives, appealing for justice and mercy. With the community's prayer and her own bravery and sacrifice, she saved many Filipinos from military cruelty and from death.

During the bombings in September 1944, many sought and found refuge at St. Agnes. She braved the bombings to bring food and clothes to the lepers. On Holy Saturday, the sisters shortened the Office because of the bombings. Sensing danger, Mother Clodesindis addressed the community: "It is impossible to leave the house now; but after five this afternoon when things are quiet, you may all go to the air-raid shelter. I shall remain at my post." When the carpet-bombing started, the sisters realized that St. Agnes was within the target area and, leaving the chapel, they hurried to the shelter. As usual, Mother was at the rear to look after everyone. Just then she met the Alejandrino children who were crying in fright. She got them candies and led them to the Sacred Heart statue to pray with them and calm their fears. In was there that an incendiary bomb struck the main building, hit the statue and killed Mother Clodesindis.

On April 4, some American soldiers brought to the sisters the bones which were believed to be Mother Clodesindis' remains. After the War, on August 11, 1945, there was a solemn transference of the bones to the cemetery at Albay. Afterwards, they were brought to the sisters' cemetery in Baguio. There, sisters come every day to pray and ask for help. Mother Clodesindis' presence still prevails.

(From: IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE by Sr. Mary John Manazan OSB.)