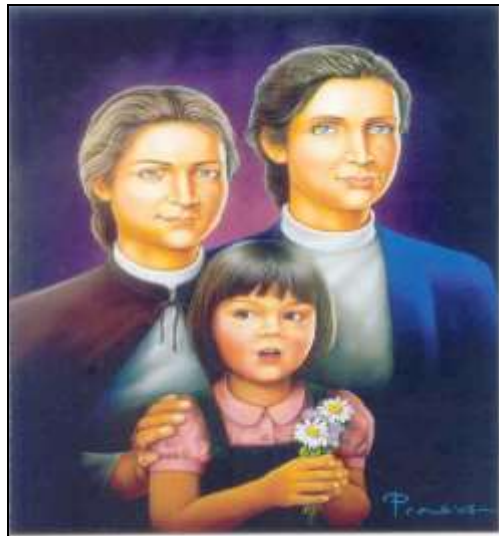


Foundation Day

by: Sister Mary Teresita Richards, SND

It is late September 1849 – During the cold blustery winter at the beginning of 1849, two young teachers, Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling, became aware of the great need among their students. Their hearts were deeply moved by the number of children in their classes and indeed in the city of Coesfeld, who lacked a stable home. Some of them had experienced the death of one parent and their other parent had left for long stretches of time in search of work—leaving these children to care for themselves. Feeling compelled to respond to the need, Hilligonde used her inheritance money and rented a little house on Suring Street. Seven poor, neglected young girls will live there with Hilligonde, and Elisabeth will help as she is able.



During the spring of 1849 Hilligonde and Elisabeth made another decision that would give permanence to their compassionate care to children in need: to the call of God to totally dedicate their lives to Him. After research they chose to join the Sisters of Notre Dame from Amersfoort, Holland. The Amersfoort congregation initially thought that Hilligonde and Elisabeth would make their Novitiate in Holland and then go back to Germany, but to keep life consistent for their young charges, and for other reasons, they began their formation for religious life while remaining in Coesfeld, continuing to care for the children.

Travel back in time to Coesfeld, Germany and with your mind's eye step into our Notre Dame history and into some the scenes behind our celebration of Foundation Day.



It is the evening of September 30, 1850 – There is much excitement in the air in Coesfeld. After a lapse of many years there will again be Sisters in Coesfeld. Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling have persevered in their care for the children and in their discernment process for religious life. The Sisters of Notre Dame had arrived in early June and the period of postulancy had taken place. A larger house had been obtained, the former Annunciade Convent that was closed during the Napoleonic Wars. It is now known as St. Annathal. The young women and the children had moved into the oldest portion of the

cloister and have managed to renovate a small portion thus far for their home. The most recent renovation was that of the former banquet hall. This interior, windowless room has been transformed into the simple St. Ignatius chapel. While Hilligonde and Elisabeth were in the solitude of a weeklong retreat the Sisters and the children have been polishing and decorating the chapel to make it ready for tomorrow's celebration.

A few hours ago the Bishop of Münster arrived for tomorrow's morning's ceremony. He is spending the night here at St. Annathal. He is pleasantly surprised how nicely furnished his rooms are, since he has been hearing that the new foundation is so desperately poor. How he laughed when the Sisters explained that the townspeople had loaned to the Sisters everything that he saw. When the parishioners had heard that the bishop was coming and that his rooms had no proper furniture or bedding, they happily rose to the occasion.

It is the morning of October 1, 1850 – The big day is here! There has been much activity at the front entrance of St. Annathal this morning as our guests arrived. Twenty priests have arrived for the Mass at which Bishop Johan Georg Müller will preside. The pews along either wall are quickly filling up with the twelve children who now live at St. Annathal, the three Sisters of Notre Dame of Amersfoort, the priests and the relatives of Hilligonde and Elisabeth. The small sanctuary is festive lit with candles on the wooden altar and decorated with bouquets of flowers. A little harmonium organ in the sanctuary begins to play the “Veni Creator” and the congregation stands and joins in the singing. At last it is time to begin. Bishop Johan Georg Müller is standing in the front of the chapel as the cross bearer leads in the two postulants who are already dressed in the long black dress of the sisters' habit.

After the opening prayer of the mass the two postulants approach the altar. The bishop asks them “Dear Sisters, what do you desire?” First Hilligonde replies and then Elisabeth, “I ask you, Most Reverend Father, for the love of God to give me the habit of the Sisters of Notre Dame, so that I may examine, with the grace of God, if it is profitable for my salvation...to lead a religious life, according to the rule of these sisters, as this has been approved by the Church.” Hilligonde and Elisabeth prostrate themselves on the chapel floor while the bishop kneels at the altar steps and leads the Litany of the Saints, asking the intercession of all of heaven upon the beginning of this new little community.



The litany completed, the bishop now takes his place in front of the altar and presents the postulants with the white veil, a symbol of interior recollection to



remind them to allow themselves to be fashioned to the likeness of God. The veil is then placed on their heads. Next they receive a short cape symbolic of the entire habit. The bishop prays, “May the Lord clothe you with the garment of salvation and encompass you with the robe of justice.” Hilligonde and Elisabeth eagerly respond, “Amen.” He then gives them the large rosary which they are to wear visibly at their side. The Bishop tells them that the rosary should always be at their hand to remind them of their uninterrupted contact with God. With a heartfelt, “Amen” Hilligonde and Elisabeth respond. Then silently Bishop Müller offers them a crucifix to kiss and to wear over their hearts. He hands them the holy rule of the congregation and says, “Receive the rule which we give you to follow; if you observe its prescriptions it will

protect you and the Lord will give you the blessing of life.” Hilligonde and Elisabeth respond, “Amen.” They receive a lit candle as the bishop says, “Receive, Sisters, the light into your hands that through this sign you may learn to flee the works of darkness and in this new way of life to follow the example of the light.” Hilligonde and Elisabeth whole heartedly respond, “Amen.”

Look at the children staring in bewilderment and perhaps giggling at their teachers’ new appearances. Look at the smiles on the faces of Elisabeth’s father and Gertrude, her sister. Note the joy on the faces of Hilligonde’s aunts, uncles, and cousins as they share in her new beginning. Don’t miss the distinguished older gentleman, Gert Jan Wolbring, who beams with pride at his niece. This family patriarch has been Hilligonde’s greatest support throughout her life.

With their candles still burning the newly invested novices return to their seats and the Mass continues. At communion they kneel to receive Jesus, the one to whom they are committing their lives. A full and joyous “Te Deum” is sung by all in the chapel to conclude the Holy Mass. Before the two new Sisters can greet their guests the procession leads them to the festively decorated refectory of the Sisters where Hilligonde and Elisabeth receive their religious names. Hilligonde Wolbring is now to be called Sister Marie Aloysia and Elisabeth Kühling is now called Sister Marie Ignatia. The Amersfoort Sisters extend warm congratulations before the new novices go back to greet their guests and to receive the warm embraces of their children who had been instrumental in igniting the fire that began Notre Dame.

