

# Foundation

Mount Mary has its roots deeply embedded in the history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. This community of religious women gave birth to the spirit that lives on in the University today. The story begins in the early 1800s in Bavaria.



After the wars of 1809, food was scarce, money was worthless, trade collapsed and disease was rampant. The government would not help, and convents and monasteries had been shut down. Fr. Michael Wittmann, a scholarly priest with an unwavering moral compass, noted the gifts of a promising girl named Karolina Gerhardinger (later Mother Theresa) and began to mentor her. She was deeply influenced by his tutelage and his example, especially



- The depth of his contemplation in action
- His loving concern for anyone in need
- His conviction that the best means to improve society was the Christian education of girls and young women
- His promotion of missionary efforts throughout the world.

These influences took root in Karolina who became Mother Theresa. They are reflected today in the mission and values that are lived on Mount Mary's campus. They have expanded considerably and been shaped by cultural and societal norms, yet, the essential calling has endured. Mother Theresa's vocation was caught by others who continued to meet the needs of their day.

As Karolina grew in intimacy with the God she encountered, she became a recognized teacher and established a Christian school. Yet, she sensed that her calling involved more. She wanted to give her whole self to this work within a religious community that would be committed, not only to the development of the mind but also to the shaping of the heart in light of Gospel principles.

In 1822, at age 25, it seemed like her dream was coming to realization. She wrote: "I cannot describe my interior peace. Now I am in Jesus! Jesus may do with me what he wants; I trust him....On him, I will build."



A few years later, in 1833, two women joined her in establishing a religious community (the School Sisters of Notre Dame) committed to the education of girls. They believed that their value-centered instruction could, indeed, transform Bavarian society through girls and women who were the primary influencers in the upbringing of children. This was an innovative approach to education in her day. Mother Theresa summarized it as "erziehung und unterricht"—the training of the mind and the minding of the heart,



intellectual excellence and the development of character. In Latin, the SSND motto of education can be translated: *virtus et scientia*, which is still the motto of Mount Mary today.

The first concern of the sisters was for poor girls in small towns and villages in order to strengthen family life. But as they were led by the Gospel, they met further hungers to which they felt impelled to respond. They took on orphanages, day nurseries, and industrial schools. For young women who were factory workers, they established homes and provided night schools. They trained future teachers and pioneered in the development of kindergartens.

The more deeply they got in touch with the roots of their call, the more it seemed to extend beyond a particular culture. By the time Mother Theresa died, the Congregation had expanded way beyond Bavaria to 11 countries in Europe and North America.

## *Call to America*

One of the most radical expansions of the original call occurred as the sisters accepted the invitation to move across the ocean to meet educational needs in North America. This new land required education to be offered in a different mode. Mother Theresa placed a young sister, Caroline Friess, in charge of all the schools that would be established in North America. While maintaining the bond of sisterhood with those in North America, Mother Theresa returned to Germany to tend to the rapidly growing community in Europe.



Sister Caroline, now known as Mother Caroline, became the pioneer in North America. She was an extraordinarily educated woman for her time. She was bi-cultural, bi-lingual, an artist, a business woman, and an educator in the avant garde methods which focused on the child in order to develop the whole person. Invited by the Bishop of Milwaukee, Wisconsin to educate the German immigrants in the area, it is there that she established the first SSND Motherhouse in North America in 1850.

Mother Caroline focused on those most in need—the poor, the neglected, those on the margins of society. But she perceived other educational needs that were not being met. The young women of Milwaukee society had no opportunities to further their education. Their influence would be significant in their families and in prominent circles of governing and business leaders. She knew of institutes of higher learning for women on the East Coast and proceeded to establish the first institute for women west of the Allegheny Mountains.

# Beginnings of a College



In 1851, Mother Caroline founded St. Mary's Institute with a strong, liberal arts curriculum for young women. Perhaps no one could have anticipated how this haven for women would satisfy the hungers for learning, for moral direction, and for expansion of the soul. The Institute was so successful that 20 years later, in 1872, Mother Caroline was invited to establish a second institute in western Wisconsin. This second St. Mary's Institute developed a college wing in 1913 and became the first four-year Catholic college for women in Wisconsin. [N.B. Before her death in 1892, Mother Caroline needed to close St. Mary's Institute in Milwaukee to laywomen. All the room was needed to house the sisters and to educate the young women who were entering the SSND community.]

By the mid-1920s, religious and civic leaders urged the School Sisters of Notre Dame to relocate the college wing from the bluffs of the Mississippi River back to Milwaukee. Intent on the call to educate women and to assist them to direct their gifts toward building the earth, Mother Kostka, now the SSND leader in North America, agreed that Milwaukee would be the best place for such a college to flourish.

She mortgaged all the property the School Sisters of Notre Dame owned by that time and purchased an 80-acre farm for sale on the outskirts of Milwaukee. In 1928, the cornerstone was laid, and it was determined that the relocated college would be renamed Mount Mary College. The statue of Mary was at the center of campus, a symbol of quiet strength and steadfast courage.



Everything was ready for the first students in the fall of 1929. A few weeks later, the stock market crashed. The sisters, grounded in a strong sense of community and purpose, made many sacrifices to meet every payment of the mortgage. They were committed to keeping this opportunity for women viable.

The Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame reflects the vocation which originally summoned this great work of education and which continues to see it through: "Deep faith and high courage urged Mother Theresa to risk already meager resources to satisfy needs wherever she was called. In her spirit we respond to God's call expressed in our times."

Through the years Mount Mary College [changing its name to Mount Mary University in 2013] continued to expand its vocational perspective. The Gospel call, especially to inclusion and social justice, remained the deeply held values of the sisters. For the first 70 years, sisters were the primary presence in classrooms, in administration, in auxiliary



offices. As the decades went by—carrying huge waves of change—men and women joined with the sisters and committed themselves to the mission and vision for which Mount Mary was founded.

At the same time, the demographics of the student body were also changing. College was no longer just for a privileged few who would become the expected leaders in society. Mount Mary sought ways to respond to the desires of older women, who never had the opportunity to

earn a degree, by offering classes in the evening. The dedication to women remained a constant even as Mount Mary opened up graduate schools for both women and men. By the 1970s, special services programs were created, as the handbook stated, to “give supportive services for students who are disadvantaged educationally, socially, physically, or economically, yet who are interested in, and intellectually capable of, following a four-year college program.” A robust Honors Program was also established to challenge those eager to go beyond the expected course of study. From the beginning, the School Sisters of Notre Dame excluded no one from their concern, and now this vocation was being realized in ever more expansive and inclusive ways.

By the 1970s the student body was also changing in terms of racial and ethnic origins. Through the decades, this has continued to have implications for curriculum, for student services and for all students and faculty. Today, over 60% of the undergraduates are ethnically diverse, and 11 different religions are represented at this Catholic university.



School Sisters of Notre Dame have passed on their deep gladness to lay administrators and professors who now continue the vocational legacy of the sisters. That original calling has taken on different shapes throughout the decades, as this mural, displayed outside the dining hall, attests. A joyous Mary continues to bless all the endeavors on this campus and to call forth a diverse and inclusive community that educates students to transform the world.

