

IMMIGRANTS CALLED BY IMMIGRANTS 1853 – 1865

CHAPTER 13

A CALL HEARD IN BAVARIA

Quite clearly, the participants had got their signals mixed. Mother Benedicta Bauer of Heilig Kreuz monastery assured the bishop of Regensburg,^[1] Germany, their volunteers for an American mission would be perfectly safe because the Benedictine monk Dom Boniface Wimmer promised to provide for their spiritual welfare and assist them in their temporal affairs. On April 4, 1853, he had written that the sisters might start for America as soon as the arrangements could be made. He would receive them at St. Vincent's College in western Pennsylvania where they could study the English language. He, himself, "would attend to everything else."^[2]

With the missionaries already three days into their transatlantic journey, Dom Wimmer sounded an entirely different tune in a letter to his friend Abbot Gregory Scherr of Metten, Germany. "In the near future I shall have to go to New York again to meet Dominican Sisters that the Convent of the Holy Cross is sending me as a cross (as if I did not as yet have enough crosses)." He would have to displace his own people in order to house the nuns "until such a time that I can find a suitable place for them." Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was a possibility since it had a German pastor, Father Raffener, who was "disposed to take them." The monk wished he had never gotten mixed up in the project to begin with. He blamed Mother Benedicta, who "did not cease to beg me and so I agreed, or rather promised, to help as much as I could to find a place for them outside of our diocese."^[3]

Two letters, two well intentioned people, two very different versions of a German mission project that would eventually lead to twelve active congregations of Dominican women in the United States—"the Regensburg Tree." First, there would have to be a collision of the two plans on a dock in lower Manhattan, and once again, adjustment of a dream to the reality of where the real need existed.

Sometime in 1851, during a recruitment and fund raising trip to his homeland, Dom

in 1846, accompanied by a group of students and candidates for the dual purpose of

course of instruction required of the teachers of girls and has acquired such perfection in all the arts that she may preside in any school for girls."[\[13\]](#)

Marie Josephine's pastor at Walderbach signed a school certificate attesting that she was "gifted from God with extraordinary talents" and "especially called and adapted for the intellectual and pious education of youth."[\[14\]](#) Once she began to consider going on mission to America, her superiors "encouraged her desire, and sent her to the Institute of Englische Fraulein at Altotting [from the Autumn of 1852 until Spring of 1853] for the purpose of mastering the English language.[\[15\]](#)

Holy Cross School could not have functioned without the help of the lay sisters. For this reason Sisters Francesca Retter and Jacobina Riederer, both of whom had expressed their willingness to emigrate, were chosen.[\[16\]](#) By 1853, the American venture moved ahead at full speed. Quoting Dom Wimmer's instructions to her ordinary, Mother Benedicta asked him to issue a "Dismissory, that is, a Latin testimonial to the effect that these Sisters are sent to the missions in America to found a convent of their Order." She also transmitted the monk's assurance that "they are directed for the time being to me as their counselor and protector."[\[17\]](#)

On May 10, the four volunteers presented themselves to the bishop at the chancery offices in Regensburg where he examined them orally and then had them sign the petition to emigrate. His Dismissory, given on May 29, noted that "The Reverend Boniface desires that we send to America some Sisters from the Holy Cross Monastery . . . well qualified for educating young girls."[\[18\]](#) Riedel's permission also noted that Sister Josepha Witzlhofer had been appointed superior of the quartet and outlined the relationship that the American foundation was to have with Holy Cross:

They remain in the congregation to which they are bound by their sacred vows and under the jurisdiction of the prioress of Holy Cross until such time as their numbers increase sufficiently to erect a new monastery in America, or in case of exigency that they be allowed to return to the Holy Cross Monastery

That specification about the building of an American monastery was going to prove vitally important when, seven years later, a different bishop and prioress in Regensburg began to harass Sister Josepha for making unauthorized foundations in the United States.

With official permission secured, the nuns were ready to consider practical matters: travel arrangements and luggage—how to go and what to take. Dom Wimmer had put Mother Benedicta in touch with Father Joseph Mueller, court chaplain to King Ludwig of Bavaria and director of the Ludwig-Missionsverein.[\[19\]](#) Founded in Munich in 1838, the Verein was intended to assist German Catholic mission projects in Asia and America. Between 1844 and 1916, the society donated nearly \$900,000 to the American missions. Part of that sum helped the Holy Cross sisters to finance their first American monasteries.[\[20\]](#) Father Mueller saw to the purchase of tickets aboard the steamship *Germania* from Bremerhaven to New York and offered to accompany the little band as far as Leipzig.

For their part, the community at Holy Cross put together a purse of 4,000 guildens (\$1,500) and filled twenty chests with articles to furnish the new chapel and convent.[\[21\]](#) Otherwise the pioneers traveled light. In the custom of the day for cloistered religious, each woman folded her habit and veil into a carpet bag along with personal articles, office book and constitutions, then put on dark secular clothes for the duration of the trip.

With Father Mueller accompanying them, the band of missionaries left Regensburg by stage the evening of July 25, 1853. After thirty-three hours of travel, the group reached Leipzig on July 27. Describing the journey for the community at Holy Cross, Father Mueller recorded:

[We] had ourselves carried to the hotel Stadt Breslau and rested for a few hours. At 6 a.m. I set out to find the Catholic Church ... drove back to the hotel to get the Sisters and then read Mass for a safe voyage. Then we took breakfast and prepared for the journey. I hurriedly wrote several letters of recommendation . . . and at 11 a.m. accompanied them to the railway station, for there was a good deal of baggage.[\[22\]](#)

At the time, supervising the "good deal of baggage" must have seemed the most needed piece of assistance on the part of the priest. However, it was one of the "hurried letters of recommendation" that turned out to be most vital to the success of the mission once the women reached New York.

On his return from the station, the Verein director wrote Mother Benedicta that her "good children" would arrive in Bremen at ten the next morning and wait for the departure hour. From that point until they landed in Manhattan almost a month later, the only record is an entry in the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith in Munich. "On August 1, four Dominican sisters from Regensburg sailed from Bremerhaven on the steamer *Germania* for North America, to establish a convent in Carrolltown, Diocese of Pittsburgh."[\[23\]](#)

After almost a month at sea, the *Germania* made port in lower Manhattan on the morning of August 26. The four German sisters waited until noon for Dom Wimmer to arrive and finally conceded that he would never appear. It was at that point that one of Father Mueller's letters saved the day. Sister Josepha was carrying a note addressed to another Father Mueller, Redemptorist pastor of the Most Holy Redeemer parish on East Third [8 Tw [(un)hurried

assistant. The rectory is roomy. I remained there four days in order to arrange everything so that by the end of the week the four Sisters had complete enclosure not only on the outside from the people, but also on the inside from the priests. They are rather confined, but it will do. They have a kitchen, a study, and a dormitory sufficiently large for all four. ... I gained an uninterrupted connection with the church and a large room under the church which the Sisters may use for their wash, a storeroom, or they could even sleep there if they wished.[\[30\]](#)

What is missing from this description is the fact that the part of the rectory assigned to the sisters was a dirt-floored basement. Before the winter was over, they did indeed sleep in "the large room under the church," but it was unheated and constantly damp. All four contracted heavy colds. Sister Francesca's illness progressed into tuberculosis. She would die of it the following year.

Both lay sisters had an additional burden which consisted in having to cook for the two priests. Their mentor admitted it was "disturbing and annoying." Nevertheless, he "was not able to make any other arrangements." Apparently Father Raffener had received the sisters "especially that he might be provided with a cook and also economize."[\[31\]](#) To save the sisters, a widow was finally engaged to do the other housekeeping chores for the two men, but the nuns were told to pay her wages. Dom Wimmer reported the financial situation as "2,500 gulden in their possession, which will soon be spent, because they have to buy cupboards, etc. The school money will provide for the necessaries of life."[\[32\]](#)

Tuition amounted to twenty-five cents a week per student, enough only for the "necessaries" for the sisters. As Dom Wimmer put it, "At present there can be no thought of building a convent." For this reason he encouraged Sister Josepha to accept "any good candidates that present themselves." Besides, it was necessary to train teachers who were "well versed in English." He promised to be responsible for such decisions, reminding the German prioress that "I am in a better position to know American needs than you in far off Holy Cross."

The only hint as to the missionaries' state of mind appeared in the last paragraph of the monk's account. "At first they were rather disheartened and diffident, but before I left, they were full of courage and confidence." This observation was the only evidence that the chaotic arrival had dampened the high spirits with which they set out. As for Dom Wimmer himself, there is some question as to how he felt about the whole episode when he wrote: "If I managed this affair well or not, I do not know. My intention was good; of that I am sure." Whatever doubts he may have had disappeared at the end. "Everything has turned out so well that one must believe it to be the will of God that matters culminated in this manner."[\[33\]](#)

The Benedictine founder told the Dominican prioress that he could not go to Williamsburg very often as it was a 400-mile journey. He did keep up with the progress of the new foundation. Early in December, Wimmer returned to New York to help the nuns acquire a lot on the corner of Graham and Montrose Avenues, a purchase that

consumed the last of their funds. On Christmas Eve, he sent his friend Abbot Gregory Scherr of Metten an account of the school. "Before the arrival of the Sisters, two men teachers never had more than 150-170 boys and girls together and now the Sisters alone have 225 girls in their classes and are expecting more."[\[34\]](#) In February, he boasted, "The good ladies have now 243 in their school, the half of which number came from Protestant schools or did not attend any."[\[35\]](#)

That December visit seems to have been the last time the "protector" acted directly on their behalf. However, during the course of the winter, the German sisters found a new clerical champion. Shortly after their arrival, Catholics on Long Island were detached from the diocese of New York and became the diocese of Brooklyn. A young Irishman, John Loughlin, was appointed bishop and Father Raffeiner served as his vicar general. The new bishop could converse in German and must have met the Regensburg nuns when he visited Holy Trinity. By early spring he offered them a loan of \$4,000 to purchase a small house. It stood between the church and the lot on which they planned to build.[\[36\]](#) On May 16, 1854, the sisters moved into their first real convent. At

M. Emilia Barth, second prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Williamsburg

In addition to the windfall from Europe, the sisters themselves managed to save five to six hundred dollars from their annual income. In addition, the nuns began a cottage industry that utilized the artistic training they had developed in Germany. Just one drawing for articles painted and embroidered by the sisters realized \$800. It was to set the stage for the many raffles and bazaars in years to come. "In this way," wrote Mother Seraphine, "about \$2000 was saved in two years."[\[38\]](#)

Just two weeks after the arrival of the newcomers, Sister Francesca Retter died from the tuberculosis she had contracted during that first winter in the basement. It must have been a terrifying initiation for the newcomers, perhaps an experience which Sister Michaela was unable to get over. Mother Seraphine recorded that Michaela was "unable to accustom herself to conditions in Williamsburg and returned to Ratisbon after two years."[\[39\]](#)

The school continued to flourish. From the very beginning, Dom Wimmer had reported that parents and children were "delighted. . . when they heard that the Sisters were to come and when they saw them."



that the mission group was subject to the motherhouse "until such time as their numbers increase sufficiently to erect a new monastery in America,"^[44] later authorities decided that this was the point at which the five German sisters and their precious American postulant^[45] became an independent entity.

Rather than celebrating a new status which they may not have known they possessed, the community which moved into Holy Cross Convent on Graham Avenue that November was focused on finding new members. Early in the next year, Father Ambrose Buchmeier of St. Nicholas parish in Manhattan, asked for sisters to teach in the girls' division of his school. Dom Wimmer had once told Mother Benedicta Bauer that "Father Ambrose scolded me sternly because I did not tell him about the Dominican Nuns because he would have taken them."^[46] Five years later, the Manhattan pastor was making another try. At the time, Sister Josepha had to say "no" for they could barely cope with the numbers in St. Alphonsus.

However, unknown to the American foundation, Mother Benedicta was in the process of leaving her office as prioress at Holy Cross and planning to go on mission to America. The former superior, accompanied by choir nuns Thomasina Ginker and Cunigunda Schell and a prospective postulant, Crescentia Traubinger, arrived at Williamsburg on October 22, 1858. Margaret Bosslet, who had been received as Sister Rosa the previous April, now had a companion in the novitiate. Crescentia became a postulant on her first day in America, spending almost two years as a candidate until she in her turn received the habit and the name "Dominica." The two young choir nuns

found the New York foundation so much to their liking that they did not want to leave.^[50] Regensburg's version of the touchy situation described that choice as "a new and bitter trial" for "poor Mother Benedicta" and blamed "The Sisters at Williamsburg [who] had advised these Sisters to stay at the convent where they had the assurance of a permanent place, whereas there would be much uncertainty in a new foundation."^[51]

As a member of the founding trio for Second Street, Manhattan, Sister Cunigunda, like her two companions, met with no uncertainties. Father Ambrose saw to it that they were comfortably provided for. During the earliest days when there was no chapel in the narrow brownstone, he allowed them to say the Divine Office in the sacristy of St. Nicholas Church.^[52] When the fledgling community expanded, they were able to acquire the adjacent brownstones and interconnect them so that the Dominican community of the Most Holy Rosary had a ready-made headquarters consisting of several adjoining houses on East Second Street.

Historians may question as to the time when the Manhattan house began to move toward independent status, but as members of the Dominican Second Order, there was never any doubt that they would one day become a separate community. In the European monastic tradition, as soon as a new foundation possessed sufficient income and the requisite numbers to live a regular religious life, it could become an independent community. In the early 1860s, it was not a matter of whether Holy Rosary would separate from its parent in Williamsburg; the question was when.

By the time she had been ten years in Brooklyn, Mother Josepha Witzlhofer was overtaken by the tuberculosis scourge that would kill so many religious in the late nineteenth century. At some point, Sister Augustine asked for more personnel to be assigned to the Manhattan house and was told to "admit [her] own candidates."^[53] Opening a separate novitiate in Manhattan would be a definitive step towards independence, one that the Holy Rosary superior was at first reluctant to take. She continued to rely on the Williamsburg house during Mother Josepha's lifetime.

two decades, the Brooklyn and Manhattan communities made decisions which placed them farther apart geographically.

**Dominican Convent and School at St.
Nicholas Church on Second Street, Manhattan**



Before relations between the Brooklyn and Manhattan convents became strained, a decision by Mother Benedicta Bauer led to a third Regensburg foundation in America. During the spring of 1860, two unhappy religious decided to leave Brooklyn; one opting to return to Holy Cross, the other to move still further away to the interior of the new country. After seven years of trial, Sister Jacobina Riederer received permission to return to Regensburg.

The "quit claim" which marked Jacobina's leaving the convent on Graham Avenue was signed by five professed religious of the

erection of the convent on Graham Avenue before he dedicated it. The problem lay in the fact that as a busy missionary the bishop seldom put things in writing.[\[58\]](#) If he had, the prioress of the new Holy Cross might have been spared much grief.

That Sister Josepha was indeed a prioress in 1858 was attested to by Bishop Synestry himself when he wrote that "the prioress of the sisters who have already gone to the missions" had consented to accept the quartet coming from Regensburg.[\[59\]](#) However, the European prelate was unwilling to cede her the full power of that position. This became all too apparent when the American superior received an official decree from Regensburg dated October 26,

- Dominic on Long Island**, (New York: Benziger, 1938) 1: 42. Primary sources assembled by Father Crawford are contained in the Crawford File, Amityville Dominican archives (AMF).
4. When writing to the Bishop of Regensburg in April of 1853, Mother Benedicta Bauer states that Dom Wimmer had "called at the convent several times" two years earlier. M. Benedicta Bauer to V. Von Riedel, April 4, 1853.
 5. From an account of the founding of the Dominican Congregation of the Holy Cross, Brooklyn, NY, written by Sister Maud Bonten, O.P., using information supplied by Mother Ignatia of Holy Cross, Regensburg in 1928. Copy in the AMP.
 6. Quoted in **The Church of St. Joseph of Yorkville** (New York: 1932) n. pag. Cited by Jay P Dolan in **The American Catholic Experience** (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 169.
 7. Mother Seraphine Staimer, Diary, 1. Begun in 1865 and kept until shortly before her death in 1889. Mother Seraphine began her account by describing the visits of Dom Wimmer to Holy Cross and the journeys of the missionaries to America.
 8. **750 Jahre Dominikanerinnenkloster Heilig Kreuz**, trans. Sister Teresa Margaret Hoessbacher, O.P., (Munchen: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 1983) 20-22, AME
 9. Staimer, Diary, 1.
 10. Sister Mary Regina Baska, OSB, **The Benedictine Congregation of Saint Scholastica**, 10-12. Cited by Eugene Crawford in **Daughters of Dominic on Long Island**, 1:61. Oral comparisons of tradition between Regensburg Dominicans and Eichstat Benedictines usually produce exclamations of "You too?" in the matter of Dom Wimmer's recruitment techniques and failure to carry through on promises of travel assistance to western Pennsylvania. Crawford characterizes the monk as a man with "too many irons in the fire."
 11. Mother Benedicta to Bishop von Reidel, May 1853, Copy in Racine Dominican Archives(RDA). Cited by Kohler 94-95 and Crawford 43-44. Amityville's oral tradition tells of two sisters in Manhattan on business during the 1880s ringing the doorbell of St. Vincent Ferrer's rectory and asking to talk to a Dominican priest as they had never met one.
 12. Sister Eugenia Glaab, O.P., Notebooks and History Chronicle, ms., Early Foundation History files, Hope Dominican Archives(HPEA). Sister Eugenia recorded this account severJ-0otMCID bg. In5(th)-5(e do]TJ-.641 0 TdSi)

25. Nicholas Balleis, OSB, came to America from a monastery in Austria in 1836, the first of his Order to arrive in the United States. He worked as a missionary in the New York area and was pastor of St. Mary's, Newark (presently a Benedictine parish), in 1853. Alexius Hoffman, OSB to Sister Jane Marie Murray, OR, of Grand Rapids, n.d., John Byrne, CSSR, to Rev. Eugene Crawford at Amityville, Dec. 14, 1936.