FRANCISCAN SISTERS - WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary is the name of the congregation founded by Mother Clara Pfaender on October 30, 1860 in Olpe, Germany. She established the new congregation for the purpose of praying for the Church, to help with the education of youth (especially orphans), to care for the sick poor and to do those charitable works which would meet the needs of the times. Mother Clara chose to adopt the Rule of St. Francis as the model for their living of religious life. With her companions, Regina Loeser and Aline Bonzel, she documented the intention to lead a community life according to the evangelical counsels, a life borne in the spirit of love, of prayer, and of penance.

In 1863 the headquarters of the community were moved from Olpe to the city of Salzkotten in the Diocese of Paderborn. Following a difficult time of relocation, the young congregation flourished and many new members were accepted. Until this time the primary duties of the Sisters had been in teaching but during the Austro-Prussian War they began to nurse the wounded soldiers. This act of mercy was to serve them well when the struggles with the Kulturkampf laws began. This was a struggle of the German government against the Catholic Church (1871-90) over control of education and Church appointments. The Sisters had to cease teaching activities but could remain a viable congregation because they were known as a nursing order.

As the congregation grew the oppressive laws were extended and the Sisters were sent to establish new missions. They went to Metz, France, to Holland to the United States. In 1872 the first Sisters arrived in the United States and established residence in St. Louis, Missouri. In a few years they built St. Anthony Hospital and it became the provincial headquarters for the U.S. province. In 1947 those central headquarters were moved to Wheaton, Illinois.

Bishop Conrad Martin who had given permission for the founding of the Franciscan congregation, was arrested and imprisoned during the Kulturkampf. He was fortunate to escape and make his way to exile in Belgium. Prior to his escape he gave to Mother Clara certain plenary powers which she was to exercise only in extreme necessity. She was empowered to choose confessors for the community and to take suitable steps to receive new novices and to permit the taking of vows. These powers were normally reserved for the clergy and she was instructed to tell no one about them. This caused great misunderstandings and tensions in the congregation.

Mother Clara Pfaender was far ahead of her time in some of the actions she took. For the good of the congregation she would consult and deal with highly placed officials and lay persons to achieve the desired results. These actions, of course, also made it possible to avoid bringing the clergy into conflict with governmental laws and restrictions. Again she was misunderstood, because such actions from a woman were not customary at that time ... especially from a woman religious. And so eventually her efforts to save the congregation and its works resulted in such discord and opposition that she was forced to resign her position as superior general. She went to Rome to try and resolve the misunderstandings and accusations concerning her conduct of the affairs of the congregation. Her attempts failed and she died in exile on October 5, 1882.
Over the years the congregation expanded to Malaysia, Indonesia and to Brazil. In December, 1963, three young missionary sisters from the United States traveled to Santarem, Brazil to begin preparation for establishing a clinic and set up a home for themselves. As the Sisters worked in the clinic the need to change the focus was more and more apparent. A decision was made to change the emphasis of their mission to maternity care. This would afford them a way to reach many mothers and not only guarantee safe deliveries, but also teach basic health and preventive medicine. The Sisters were meeting the needs of the people and the times. Five Sisters now serve in the 42-bed Holy Family Maternity Hospital as an outreach to the poor and needy of Brazil. Started in 1970, the Sisters' midwifery training program has provided more than one hundred girls from the interior villages up and down the Amazon and Tapajos Rivers with the practice and theory they need to make safe deliveries.

The Wheaton Franciscan Sisters own and sponsor seven hospitals and two housing developments in the United States. The health care institutions provide an excellent opportunity to promote a therapeutic environment pledged to quality care and compassion and understanding for all who are there as patient, staff, employee, visitor or volunteer. In Wheaton, the Sisters have Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital; in Wisconsin, St. Mary's Medical Center, Racine, St. Elizabeth Hospital, Appleton, St. Michael Hospital and St. Joseph Hospital, Milwaukee; in Iowa they own St. Francis Hospital, Waterloo and Mercy Hospital of Franciscan Sisters, Oelwein; in Missouri the Sisters have historically sponsored St. Francis Medical Center, Cape Girardeau and St. Anthony Medical Center, St. Louis. They have also established an affiliation, through the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, with St. Anthony's Hospital, for the purpose of helping the Church assure the presence of Catholic health care in the inner city of Milwaukee.

Seeking to accommodate the great need for low and moderate income housing, the Franciscan Sisters developed Francis Heights-Clare Gardens in Denver, Colorado and Marian Park in Wheaton, on properties owned by the congregation. Their Franciscan housing developments offer more than just a place to live; the residents are helped and encouraged to create a community of caring people. It is seen as a way of following the example of Mother Clara to serve those most in need. For when oppression of the poor, the homeless, and the aged are noted -- when the dignity of each person is not seen as being of importance or recognized as vital to their humanness, the Franciscan Sisters have tried to meet that challenge. Lives have been changed and made better because people have seen the Good News of Christ in action.

Many Wheaton Franciscans do not work in the institutions they own but instead are busy offering governance leadership, educating, ministering, praying with, searching for answers and/or solutions, and working at the multitude of other activities that make them a source of strength, energy, love and leadership for their congregation, their communities and the Church.

The Sisters have not forgotten the primary purpose of their founding — to pray for the Church. And so they have established a place of solitude and contemplation in the woods of central Wisconsin. The Christine Center of Meditation is a community of persons dedicated to meditation and contemplation as a means of spiritual transformation in Christ ... it is a spiritual refuge combining manual labor and prayer in the hectic environment in which we live today.
At present there are some 1350 Sisters in the world-wide Franciscan congregation. The general headquarters were moved from Salzkotten to Rome in 1968. The American province (Wheaton Franciscans) has 221 members with 133 sisters living at Our Lady of the Angels Motherhouse in Wheaton.

Wheaton Franciscan Sisters — followers of St. Francis and Mother Clara — hold the ministries they sponsor in trust for God. They will continue to work to shape the future by giving priority to the poor and searching to discover and fulfill the needs of the time.

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- S. Virginia Ruth

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