

A Brief History of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines (Part I) 1906 – 2006

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The Prioress General, Mother Birgitta Korff, OSB, had received an appeal from the Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, Dom Ambrosius Agius, OSB: Catholic schools were needed to remedy the religious ignorance among the population due to the lack of priests. (In 1898 Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States in the Treaty of Paris. Spanish priests and religious left the country in large numbers and the Church had a vacuum with only a few Filipino priests and some Spanish friars who attended mostly to the remaining Spanish population.) "Hundreds of thousands of children grow up without any instruction," the Nuncio wrote, "and thousands upon thousands must die without the sacraments."

The need for evangelization at the turn of the 20th century was acute not only because of the withdrawal of the Spanish religious and priests. There was also the growth of the new "nationalist" religion, Aglipayanism. With the Americans came Protestantism as well. Thus, religious instruction was uppermost in the apostolic agenda of the Sisters during those early years.

Mother Ferdinanda Hoelzer, OSB was the head of the 5-member group that sailed from Europe in mid-August 1906 and arrived in Manila on September 14, Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.



Evangelization in schools

Schools seemed to be the best vehicle to reach the young who knew hardly anything of their faith. The Philippine Education Act of 1902 forbade the teaching of religion in public schools. The children could be reached mainly through Catholic schools. On December 3, 1906, the first five Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the country opened their first school – soon to be called "St. Scholastica's College" in the district of Tondo. It did not matter that there were only 8 pupils at the



start – 6 girls and 2 boys who paid tuition. With the little money that they got, the Sisters also started a free school that had an enrollment of 50 boys and girls.

Mother Ferdinanda was on a ship from the United States where she had gone on a "begging" trip, and Bishop John McGinley of Legazpi was on the same ship. He asked for sisters to run a

school in his diocese that the parish priest had been trying unsuccessfully to operate; she agreed to send four. There was a need; the call was made; she had to answer. That was 1912. Thus, enthusiastic young children of Bicol entered St. Agnes' Academy.



Meanwhile, the number of students at St. Scholastica's College in Manila kept rising, and larger facilities had to be sought to accommodate both students and Sisters. These needs the prioress and her Sisters had to meet. Thus, the transfer from Tondo to San Marcelino after only a year, and then again in 1914 to Singalong where St. Scholastica's College finally established its own home, at 2560 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Care of the sick

In 1913 Mother Angela Boedeker took over the role of heading the Prioery from Mother Ferdinanda. A new problem faced her when she first arrived as Visitatrix: the health of the Sisters. One of the pioneer five – all young Germans – Sister Crescentia Vesper, had to return to Germany after hardly a year due to failing health and succumbed the year following. Poverty, hard work, drastic change of climate took their toll; something had to be done. God provided: a beautiful property in Baguio was up for sale at a low price, as the owners wanted to return to the United States after having lost a son. Because God's hand was so apparent in His guidance, the Sisters called the place "Mt. Providence" – today's St. Scholastica's Convent – on a cul-de-sac off Wagner Road, Baguio. Young as the Sisters were at that time, they probably had no thought of its becoming a retirement home and a home for the sick as the years moved on to the middle of the century.

From school to school...

In 1919 it was time for another visitation from a Councilor from the Motherhouse. Mother Clodesindis Lueken, OSB came to the Philippines to visit the communities. The following year she was appointed the new prioress of the Manila Prioery. New signs were there on the horizon, to be read – and addressed. The need for schools, especially in the poorer areas of the country, was great.



Hardly had she started her term than she opened a Free School for both boys and girls in a corner of the grounds of St. Scholastica's College. Although elementary education was compulsory and free in public schools, such schools were still few and far between. Mother Clodesindis solved

the problem for the many and increasing number of children in the neighborhood of the new college.

In 1921 Mother Clodesindis was asked by the parish priest of Opon (later Lapu-Lapu), Cebu to take over the administration of the parish school. St. Alphonsus Catholic School remains one of the economically poorer schools under the priory but also with one of the largest student populations. Mother Clodesindis asked the Motherhouse to send more Sisters to the Philippines as requests for schools came one upon the other. The following year two requests came from Pampanga; for Bacolor and then for Angeles. The former became St. Mary's Academy and the latter, Holy Family Academy. The bishop had a further reason for asking for Sisters to take over the parish school, which had not yet been offering the standard required curriculum: the proximity of Fort Stotsenberg with its many American servicemen and the sprouting canteens and other eateries near the camp. Another three years and more requests: one for the Academy of Our Lady of Lourdes in the island of Camiguin, off Mindanao; another for Holy Infant Academy in Tacloban, Leyte, and one in the neighborhood of an American navy station and shipyard in Cavite: Sacred Heart Academy. Two more requests were answered by Mother Clodesindis before she left in 1927 upon her election as Prioress General. The bishop of San Fernando, Pampanga wanted the Assumption Academy to be administered by the Sisters; that would be the third in the same diocese. That was 1925. The next year, the bishop of Lipa asked that a Catholic school be set up by the Sisters on the island of Marinduque. This was Immaculate Conception Academy of Boac – right on top of a hill, not unlike a "Monte Cassino" gracing the Philippine skies.

From schools to shores and hillsides...

Waiting and longing for a word of God – after decades without the ministrations of priests whether at birth or at dying – were the people in barrios or clusters of huts along the seashore and on mountain sides and hills. Mother Clodesindis recognized that her sisters were fully occupied with the work in school, the convent, their hours of prayer, and the other demands of community life. But the need was acute. So, non-school days, weekends were spent by many going to prisons, welfare homes, parishes in outlying towns and provinces for religious instruction. Vacations provided good opportunities to answer needs in farther places through "missions". If the barrio was near the sea, go by boat; if along the hillside and distances were far, ride a carabao to reach the people. A 'mission' would normally be done by a sister who would also have some nursing skills and another or one or more lay catechists who would handle religious instruction. Looking



into their health needs would communicate the concern for both body and soul and invariably establish trust and friendship. After several days of "mission", the people would be ready for the visit of a priest who administered the sacraments. Friendships were forged and the sense of community deepened; awareness of the love and care of God lit again and cherished. Thus did the sisters bring the love of God to many more than the young ones who came to them in their own schools.

...students as teachers

Around 1914 a new Education Act allowed optional religious instruction in public schools. Students in the Benedictine schools were taught how to teach and impart the beauty of their faith to children in the public schools. Thus, prisons, orphanages, welfare homes, parishes could be reached and nourished with the faith and the love of God.

Mother Clodesindis would leave the Philippines in 1927 when she was elected prioress general after which time she would return once more as prioress of the Manila Priory. Mother Pacifica Gerding, OSB would take her place as prioress for the years 1927- 1933.

To the Visayas...

Except for Cebu, where the Lapu-Lapu school was and Holy Infant Academy in Tacloban, Leyte, and missions in the surrounding barrios, most of the work of the sisters had so far been in the island of Luzon. The sisters did not keep the school in Camiguin for long; it was turned over to the local authorities.

The times were getting politically charged with nationalist groups rebelling not only against the colonial government but also against the social order that pitted sharply the poor and the rich. Pampanga was a "hotbed" of peasants seeking relief from their oppression from the landed rich. Mother Pacifica added another place for her sisters to work in: Mexico, Pampanga. In 1938 Mother Clodesindis, back in the country, would respond to a plea from Candaba, Pampanga, where Aglipayans were making an aggressive inroad into the nominally Catholic population.

A call came from the South in 1930. An old school in Ormoc, Leyte needed rehabilitation and upgrading: St. Peter's Institute. The Benedictine Sisters were approached to take it over. It offered the elementary grades; the sisters added the high school, and it became St. Peter's Academy. Some years later, the school opened college courses; it grew to be St. Peter's College. Here too, on the island of Leyte, the word of God was brought beyond the school walls.

In 1941 another school was taken over by the sisters, this time in Sta. Cruz, Laguna – St. Gertrude's Academy. It would not live long, but it did serve as a place of refuge for the sisters in the ensuing calamity of war.

World War II in the Philippines...

December 8, 1941. A date of most unexpected but momentous events. Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. The Americans were caught unawares. The United States declared war on Japan. The Philippines was dragged into the war since it was a colony of the United States. Bombs fell too on Philippine soil. Mother Amadea Bessler, OSB having been appointed into the office of prioress only the



year previous, had to face and make difficult decisions. Schools closed. Evacuation centers had to be sought for the sisters. Food got scarce. Communication between the priory and the different houses in the provinces was difficult – where available.

...cure the sick

Two days into the war and wounded soldiers from the American forces were brought to St. Scholastica's College. Sisters ministered to them. Barely a month later, the Japanese army sealed the school as "property of the Japanese government". Once again, sick and wounded soldiers, this time Japanese, were brought in – and sisters also ministered to them.

Then, a semblance of order. The Philippines was now under Japan. A new government. Schools re-opened. A new language had to be learned by all. New curricula. But now for long.

...liberation – and destruction



September 21, 1944. The Battle of Liberation started. The Japanese re-occupied St. Scholastica's, leaving the sisters only their living quarters and the chapel. By mid- February of 1945, the fighting had reached Manila, and St. Scholastica's was bombed – and almost completely destroyed as incendiary bombs burned all the buildings down except two wooden structures at a corner of the campus. Most refugees who had sought shelter in the college were trapped in what they thought might be a shelter and killed. The formation of a human S.O.S in the garden stopped the bombing. The Americans had been under the mistaken information that the Japanese were still occupying St. Scholastica's when the latter had already evacuated.

Houses in the provinces had different experiences; anxiety, danger, lack of food were the lot of all. St. Agnes' Academy had a similar experience as Manila as Legazpi was bombed, and the school was hit. Mother Clodesindis, superior of the community at that time and Sister Edilburgis were hit and died - the former shielding two little children in her arms.

Reconstruction

The sisters were given shelter by the neighbors – families of alumnae and parents of students – while attempts at reconstruction were done with whatever donations came, mostly from

abroad. Mother Amadea Bessler had to go to the United States for the Congregation's General Chapter; her Subprioress, Sister Leonarda Schmidt took charge of the Manila priory. The former was elected into the General Council, and a new prioress was appointed for the Philippines: Mother Stefana Gaechter.

The great task of reconstructing the Manila Priory fell heavily on the new prioress who arrived in the Philippines in January 1948. The war had destroyed not only buildings but also disturbed the rhythm of the monastic life of the communities as well as the conduct of their apostolates.

...war claims

Since the priory house, including the school in Manila, had been destroyed by the Americans, they could be eligible for "war claims" from the United States. Thus Mother Stefana, assisted by her Subprioress, Sr. Ma. Ligouri del Rosario, and represented by Mr. Lewis McGowan, an American lawyer, applied for "claims" with the U.S. War Claims Commission in Washington, D.C. – and succeeded in obtaining a good amount.

...internationalization

The end of World War II for the Philippines brought also the inauguration of the Philippine Commonwealth, a step towards the granting of independence to the Philippines by the United States. There were changes in the political climate and the political scene.

At the Priory level, Mother Stefana took the first step, internationalizing the composition of those who held leadership positions in the community as well as the school. Though not by rule, most or all, of the major offices had so far been assigned to the German sisters with the understandable reasoning that the Filipino sisters were still "new". Mother Stefana appointed a Filipina to be her Subprioress. The novice mistress was Dutch; the directress of the school was German; the dean of arts and sciences, Filipino; the dean of music, German; the high school principal, Chinese, and the grade school principal, Filipino.

...professional preparation

Another move that the Prioress took in view of the future was the professional preparation of the young sisters to fit them for the positions in the priory and its apostolates.

...response to the apostolate needs

Hardly had the War ended than requests for Sisters once more started for administering or running schools. The parish priest of Taal, Batangas, where some Sisters had evacuated, asked that the latter take over the parish school. This was our Lady of Caysasay Academy. Still, in 1945, two

requests came from Leyte: the opening of Holy Cross Academy in Carigara and the administration of St. Joseph's College in Maasin.

...feed the hungry

Care for the poor, especially the poorest among them, had always been an important feature in the apostolate of the Sisters. All houses had a formal or informal structure for attending to the needs of these special people, ever-increasing in numbers in the country. In Manila, the care given to the poor, especially of the neighborhood, was given a formal structure with the establishment of St. Stephen's Patronage with its own small office and service area at the corner of Estrada and Singalong streets. Sr. Dolores Valera, OSB was initially, and for many years following, overall-in-charge. Social Action groups from SSC did practical work at St. Stephen's besides other places outside of school.

...changing of the guard

In 1955 in the midst of her second term as Prioress, Mother Stefana – weak in health but strong in leadership and action – died. St. Cecilia's Hall, the last building being reconstructed after the War, was scheduled to have its blessing and inauguration. These had to be postponed. Mother Godfrieda Baumeister, OSB was appointed the new prioress. She was a "Filipina" through and through in spite of her German roots. Maasin and Legazpi had seen her leadership which had brought great and lasting love and appreciation of students and parents for Benedictine education and the Benedictine ideals.

Conscientization

The dire situation of the country with its few but powerful rich and its many yet powerless poor stirred at individual consciences as well as the collective conscience of the Church. But effective action was slow in forthcoming.

...new response

Appreciation for their Scholastic education led alumnae in Negros Occidental to seek the possibility of having a Benedictine school in their midst where they could send their children. "Boarding" was no longer available at St. Scholastica's, Manila; so perhaps a St. Scholastica's could open in Bacolod where their children could go. In 1958 the dream of the alumnae came true, with St. Scholastica's Academy, Bacolod rising on donated land. SSA, Bacolod, with its relatively high tuition costs, could be available mostly for the well-to-do. What about the poorer children? Its "twin-school" was put up in Guinobatan, Albay: St. Benedict's Academy opened also in 1958.

Education was greatly desired by Filipino parents for their children, and some had a preference for Benedictine education. Another donation of a considerable expanse of land led to the opening of another St. Scholastica's Academy, this time in developing Marikina Heights, Rizal.

That was 1961. But it, too, must have a "twin" for the poorer children. Four years later, another St. Scholastica's Academy opened its doors for high school children in a poor but hardworking town in Cebu – Tabunok.

In a barrio of Bacolod itself, a free vocational high school came to be because Scholasticans and their friends who had a good share of the world's goods thought of a worthy way of sharing what they had with those who had none towards the latter's self-development and eventual self-sufficiency. Thus, with donations, the beginnings of the Holy Family Vocational High School, a free school, rose I Sum-ag, Bacolod in 1966. The Benedictine community of St. Scholastica's Academy, Bacolod, would take charge of its administration. Later the work of the German Sisters involved in the school brought in substantial donations from the Federal Republic of Germany in the form of additional facilities and equipment for its vocational and science laboratories.

...medical apostolate

In 1965 the Office of Prioress once more passed from one hand to another: from Mother Godfrieda to Mother Assumpta Filser, OSB. The latter had, so to say, grown up in the Philippines, having come to the country as a young postulant years back. The concerns and the work of the previous prioress passed on to her and were embraced by her.

A new area of apostolate presented itself: formal medical work in a hospital. The General of the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) in Rome had approached Mother General Ma. Lucas Rauch, OSB with the request for the Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines to administer the new hospital his Society was putting up in Tacloban, Leyte. Mother Ma. Lucas, a medical doctor herself, welcomed the opportunity for this new apostolate in the Manila priory. Thus, St. Paul Hospital opened in 1965 with the Benedictine Sisters operating it. Some Sisters were sent to the Norfolk priory in the United States to prepare them for special hospital work as X-ray technicians, lower administration, and hospital records work. The priory had a doctor of medicine to take the helm; she started a special program for "under-fives" children as well which includes not only their care and proper nourishment but education for the mothers to enable them to give that care.



Attuned to the "signs of the times"

Mother Prioress Assumpta took over and furthered initiatives started by her predecessor. Adjustments were being made in the Priory Government itself. Self-determination and self-government were moves in the Philippine political sphere. Mother Assumpta thought it was – or soon would be – time for Filipinization also in the government of the priory. She shared her

thinking with the Generalate. When her term was over in 1970, Mother Margarita Alovera was appointed prioress, the first Filipino sister to hold that position.

The office of the Prioress was getting very heavy with the increase of the number of houses, the increase in the novitiate, the changes in government regulations regarding schools, and more.

Changes in those areas also had to be faced and tackled, and certain moves were tried out towards more reasonable and efficient arrangements. Among these was the transfer of the priory government and the novitiate to another place than Manila. Marikina, with its considerably wider land area, was chosen. In 1968 the Formation House was built for the novitiate. For some time the Priory Government left the Manila house and occupied a part of the Formation House. This however was due to be changed again after a time; the prioress and her council returned to Manila, while the school community – called the Manila community to distinguish it from the Priory House community – had a separate convent built, and in 1971 left the Priory House. This proved to be a better solution and has remained since.

... waves from Vatican II

Concern for the Church in the World was heightened and given new dimensions. These would include sharing the anguish and pains of the people of God from "within" and helping them from "within" in seeking more meaningful solutions towards a truly human life. Involvement would go beyond "charity" which meant only giving palliative assistance; it would go further towards freeing the poor from the bonds of poverty and misery towards a worthy life of dignity and selfhood.

Religious congregations in the Philippines delved into implications of this turn in their apostolate, their understanding of what they are called upon to do in their vowed service of God and His people. In a country like the Philippines where many poor had so little while the few rich had almost everything, choices for decisive action were not easy-- even for religious. Perhaps the fact that a good number of them came from the "upper class" contributed to the difficulty of true and radical conscientization. Thus, in the Association of Major Religious Superiors, there was initially -- and for quite some time -- no unanimity in thinking and decision-making and consequent action regarding socio-economic, and hence also political issues confronting the country and the



people. Mother Margarita had to face such reality and make decisions not popular with some alumnae and parents of students in the Benedictine schools. When she signed a manifesto of the AMRSP advocating social justice, she also had to face "disapproval" from former friends and patrons. But it was a "moment of God" for the Priory and the Congregation.

The changes emanating from Vatican Council II were increasingly being felt in religious

congregations among other groups in the Church. The Missionary Benedictine Sisters had drafted a set of temporary Constitutions for the Congregation, to be followed by all communities for a stipulated period. Among the new provision was the holding of priory chapters with delegates elected by the sisters of a priory. Manila had its first priory chapter in 1971, followed by another two years later. The Third Manila Priory Chapter was held in 1975. By then another change had set in: the prioress would no longer be *appointed* by the Generalate but would be *elected* by the delegates to the Priory Chapter. In 1975 Mother Irene Dabalus became the first elected Filipino prioress.

Four-pronged thrust of apostolate

With the leadership of the new prioress, the Chapter analyzed the Philippine situation and came up with what since then has been known as the "four-pronged thrust" of the apostolate of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines. Emphasis would be put on: 1) the social orientation of the apostolate in the schools and the hospital; 2) the strengthening of socio-pastoral work; 3) direct involvement in apostolate for indigenous peoples, especially in the country itself; 4) readiness to participate in the apostolate of the congregation's mission abroad by sending Filipino missionaries on requests of the Generalate.

The Sisters espoused the thrust with great enthusiasm, but the years have shown that "enfleshing" them is not as easy. However, belief in its relevance and urgency has led Chapter after Chapter re-emphasizing its expression, seeking further ways of incarnating them in the apostolate, realizing that the evils and the needs remain valid and menacing to the people of God.

1972: Martial law was declared in the country. Amid repression and danger, ways and means were sought and ventured into to help the people, particularly the poor and the persecuted.

1986: the amazing EDSA revolution that sent the dictator literally flying out of the country. Sisters and students were among the first to respond to the Cardinal's call to "go to EDSA" and all that meant.



Mother Irene was re-elected after her first 5-year term in 1980. However, at the General Chapter in 1982, she was elected Vicar General and thus had to leave for Rome.

Mother Angelica Leviste OSB was elected in her place in 1983, would serve out her first term of 5 years, be re-elected for the allowable second term of 3 years till 1991.

Mother Pia Lansang OSB would be elected prioress in 1991 and served till 1996, after which time Mother Angelica would be brought back to the office for another 8 years till 2004.

... insertion communities

In 1976 a request came from the bishop of Bukidnon for a community that would live among the people; the choice of place was Pangantucan. The community worked with the people there for the next 8 or so years. Serious dangers to their lives from extremist anti-government groups prompted the superiors to withdraw them. However, by then the new bishop of Bukidnon asked for sisters to run San Isidro College in Malaybalay, in the same province; the prioress consented to send sisters on a three-year contract, though renewable.

In 1982 the application of the Misioneras Benedictinas de Espana to be integrated into the Congregation of the Missionary Benedictine Sister was underway; this would be finalized in 1984. The Spanish Sisters had an "insertion community" in Kalumburu, a kind of oasis in the northwestern tip of Western Australia. With Australia being nearer to the Philippines than to any other priory of the congregation, Kalumburu became a "house" of the Manila Priory. The Sisters there live with a community of aborigines, evangelizing through word and deed.

Another insertion community was planned and started in Balanga, Bataan in 1985 where conflicts between government and people were severe, particularly due to the nuclear plant being started by the government in spite of serious dangers to the environment and the people. This venture of a new community was soon aborted. Sentiments contrary to government moves were not yet met with unanimous acceptance by all pastors of the Church; the Sisters' efforts ran counter to the more placid ways of the parish head and so the Sisters had to withdraw.

The Priory Chapter of 1990 mandated the setting up of a true insertion community in Mindanao. The choice was for Marihatag in Surigao del Sur where a community of Sisters started to live with the people in their village in a house like theirs, in 1991.

At around the same time, Mt. Pinatubo in Pampanga erupted and the Aetas had to flee from their ancestral lands along the mountain. Their place of refuge - with the help of two Sisters - was Palayan, Nueva Ecija. The two sisters lived there with them and with the aid of several well-meaning groups, helped them form a community. This however was short-lived as the Aetas returned to their ancestral homes once the eruption had stopped. They feared the occupation of their land by other people.

The Marihatag community continues to assist the people in improving their lives, introducing planting and use of herbs for medicine, sustainable agriculture, self-help development projects, care and proper nourishment of young children, teaching in the public school, and community development.

In 2001 another insertion community was established in Mindanao, this time in Mati, Davao Oriental. Emphasis would be on helping the people who are into farming to use sustainable agriculture and livestock raising to lift them out of extreme poverty. At the same time, the Sisters started St. Benedict's Farm Institute for the farmers' greater and more formal assistance.

The latest addition to this apostolate is the Sisters' community at the Community Development Center in Taal, Batangas. Started some 25 or so years ago as a social apostolate of the Taal Sisters' community running Our Lady of Caysasay Academy, the Center continued its

services even when the Sisters turned over the administration of the school back to the parish. In 2005 the Priory approved the setting up of a community to continue the work at CDC.

... more educational institutions

Social orientation of education has remained a priority in Benedictine schools. Circumstances and events in the country and the world would prompt teachers and administrators to seek ways of fighting against the tide and the onslaught of globalization and materialism. Peace education continues to be a priority against strong odds in an increasingly growing culture of violence.

Though reluctant to increase their involvement in schools in the light of personnel demands in the other apostolates and requests for missions abroad, two new schools were added by the Priory in the new millennium. The demand for nurses and caregivers in the developed countries has siphoned out needed medical personnel from the country itself. This lack of well-trained nurses was keenly felt by the Sisters' hospital in Tacloban. The situation was aggravated by the closure of the Divine Word University that had been a good source of trained nurses in the past. The Sisters decided to start a medical school offering nursing as well as other medical courses. In 2000 the St. Scholastica's College of Health Sciences opened, close to the Divine Word Hospital. Since it started to graduate nurses – with very good records at Board examinations – the hospital's needs have been met.

The following year saw the opening of another St. Scholastica's College, this time in Westgrove, Cavite. Not keen for another school in a high-end subdivision area, the Sisters took a second look at the attractive offer of a donation -- of not only land but also the first school building, a replica of St. Scholastica's College, Manila -- that was promoted by a desire for a school with a **social orientation**. The donation was accepted and St. Scholastica's College – Westgrove accepted its first students in 2001.

... care for the elderly

In his Rule St. Benedict enjoins on the Abbot or superior to have a special concern for the sick and the elderly. In a priory that is a century old and in times of increasing longevity with the improvement of health sciences, it is to be expected that there would be an increasing number of elderly members, not to mention the sick needing special care. The concern was heightened with incidences of sick and aging Filipino sisters who could not have the height and the cold of Baguio. A priory-wide survey of the Sisters on their preferences of a retirement convent when their time would come led to the decision for the healthier and cooler environment of Marikina. St. Benedict's Home received the sick and elderly sisters formerly occupying an infirmary in the Priory House, in the year 2000. The elderly live next door to the very young in the novitiate and old and young share the chapel of the latter for the daily Eucharistic celebration.

Accent on Justice, Women, and the Environment

The Priory Chapter 2004 brought Mother Mary John Mananzan OSB into the office of prioress. Like most of her predecessors, she was not a stranger to the workings and decisions of the priory, having been consistently delegate to the Chapter as well as a member of the Priory Council. Thus, she was privy to the directions and decisions previously taken. Benedict likewise provides in his Rule that in the weightier matters, all the members of the community -- young and old -- should be consulted.

From the start of their work in the Philippines, the prioress general had written the Sisters emphasizing the importance and value of educating the young Filipinas due to the important role women played in Filipino family life. This emphasis was not lost on subsequent waves of Sisters who came to the country. It was heightened on a new dimension when later generations recognized the "lower" role and regard for Filipino women to the point of injustice, even in provisions of law. Later years would bring to the fore the oppression of women and the sufferings of children. These too were part of the concerns in the work for the poor; another important item in the apostolate of the Priory. Translating this concern into meaningful action programs was not so easy, but in 2002 a "shelter" for women and children was set up in *Bahay Lila*. That at least was a start. Work for the dignity and welfare of women had been a strong item in the apostolate agenda of the present prioress long before her election to head the Priory. It continues to be so for head and members.

In 1986 an Institute of Women's Studies rose to bring enlightenment and education on women's rights and dignity especially to women from the Third World.

Another item on the apostolate agenda that has been a "concern" but initially with only "nominal response" even within the Priory is *care for the environment*. A member of the Priory had long been fired with this need of the country and was actually one of the founders of *Lingkod Tao Kalikasan*, a concerned group that has been steadfastly at work for decades. For differing reasons, response to this cause had initially been slow, but fortunately for people and country – and the world – it has been picking up.

However, it is to be recognized that the odds are stacked strongly against it with money and power of this world not on its side. Nonetheless, Priory and Prioress are behind it as another work of God for humankind. In 1999 the Women and Ecology Wholeness Farm was opened in Mendez, Cavite, and continues to spread its mission perhaps slowly, but pervasively.

Pax Benedictina

Benedict was clear that all works for humankind and creation have value only if they come from God and are ultimately done in love of and for Him. Thus, in the midst of concern for His people, all thought and inspiration have to come from Him in the stillness of communion with Him in prayer. Never to be forgotten, therefore, is the deepening of the prayer life – not only of the Sisters but of those they work with and work for.

A special place to "come aside and rest" with the Lord was set up in 1994 – St. Scholastica's Center of Spirituality – in Tagaytay. Initially meant for students, faculty and staff from the Benedictine Schools, it is open for other groups for prayer and other spiritual exercises. It seems

that it has answered a felt need of many as its calendar is filled well in advance. It has a well-sized chapel that was donated, together with a *facsimile* of Benedict's cave in Subiaco. Another donation in 2005 added to its spiritual offerings: the St. Benedict Resource Center with a good collection of Benedictine and other spiritual books and resources.

The Prioresses, in and out of the priory chapters, have consistently emphasized on the members of the Priory that action for God can only stem from, and be fed and perhaps brought to fruition by Him. Thus, the priority of **prayer**, and Benedictines that they are, of **community life**; only then can their **work** be pleasing to God and bear fruit.

For His greater glory

As the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines enter the end of the timeline of a century, they thought of what all God's works wrought through them in those 100 years have meant for His Filipino children. It would be good to remember them, to cherish them, to thank and praise God for them. And so the Priory has put up the St. Scholastica's Archives – Museum that was mandated by the Priory Chapter of 2001 as a fitting monument to its one hundred years. The Priory also wished to build a lasting monument of the Centennial in the hearts of its co-workers and so has challenged all its houses to commit themselves to see to it that each and every one of their co-workers acquire a house and lot by the closing of the Centennial Year.

That in all things God may be glorified!

SOURCES:

Sister M. Caridad Barrion, OSB. *The Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines, 1906-1981* (Manila, St. Scholastica's Priory) 1982

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Acta of the Priory Chapters of the Manila Priory