

Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary continue to “build bridges”

The numbers of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary may have fluctuated over the years, but their mission—to bridge societal needs and ethnic gaps—has never wavered. The order’s founder, the serious and devout Elizabeth Barbara Williams, knew from childhood that she wanted to serve God. The question was: how? Born February 11, 1868, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Williams received her education from the Ladies of the Sacred Heart and from the Sisters of the Holy Family, second oldest society of African-American religious in the United States.

At 19, Williams entered the Sisters of Saint Francis Convent in Louisiana. When that order disbanded in 1912, she entered the novitiate of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore where she was received as a novice and given the name, Sister Mary Theodore. Two years into the life of an Oblate Sister, Williams was still not sure that she had found her true calling. In 1915, while working at Trinity College in Washington, she learned that Father Ignatius Lissner, provincial of the Fathers of the Society of African Missions, needed a religious to found a congregation of black sisters in Savannah.

Tide of prejudice running high

With the tide of prejudice against blacks (and others, notably Catholics) running high in the Georgia Legislature of the day, a proposed law forbidding white teachers to instruct black children threatened to join the infamous Veasey Convent Inspection Act on the books. Schools founded by Father Lissner in Georgia and staffed by Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception would close if the bill became law. When two African-American Congregations in the south—the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Holy Family Sisters—could supply no help,

Lissner drew up a constitution and received permission from Bishop Benjamin J. Keiley of Savannah to establish a religious order of black sisters. It was then that he recruited Williams, who had previously experienced life in two religious congregations. On October 15, 1916, she received the habit of the new order and took the name of Mother Mary Theodore.

Move to New York

The order that Mother Theodore founded, the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, was to remain in the prejudiced-riddled south for seven years, from 1916–1923. In 1922, realizing that this prejudice was not decreasing and that vocations were not increasing rapidly, Mother Theodore asked Bishop Keiley’s permission to move her community to New York under the aegis of Patrick Cardinal Hayes. (The previous year, Mother Theodore had established Saint Benedict’s Day Nursery for children of the poor in the Harlem area.) By 1923, the sisters were able to move into their new residence in New York. In 1929, a Staten Island novitiate was established for training of those entering the order.

In addition to Saint Benedict’s Day Nursery, the Handmaids of

Mary instituted a Christ Child Club, a girls’ sodality, several small schools, and a soup kitchen. Part of Saint Mary’s Convent became a working girl’s home. Mother Theodore embraced this varied ministry eagerly.

“Throughout last winter,” reported a story in the August 15, 1931 issue of *The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen’s Association of Georgia*, “Mother Theodore declined to leave to any of the other sisters the work of ladling soup in the kitchen conducted for the poor, despite the fact that the burden of the undertaking grew far beyond the proportions first expected and was taking an increasing toll of her strength.” *The Bulletin* article continued: “At the discontinuance of this work, however, she was confined to her bed, and became dangerously ill a week before her death (in August, 1931).”

Today, Mother Theodore’s sisters continue her work. As with other religious communities, their numbers are not great and their members are aging. Presently one of three orders of predominately African-American Sisters serving in this country, they now number twenty-two sisters; twenty of them professed, plus one novice and one candidate. Their membership is more ethnically varied. One sister who has been in the order for twenty-five years is from the Philippines. Another sister has a French-Italian background. There is an Armenian sister and there are three sisters from Africa; two, from Nigeria and a candidate from Kenya.

The work goes on
Congregation Minister Sister



Mother Theodore, FHM

Loretta Theresa Richards, FHM, who observes her 60th anniversary in the order in October 2008, says that, although there have been changes, the work goes on. The Sisters still operate Saint Benedict’s Day Nursery in Harlem, but no longer run a summer camp on Staten Island. They do, however, operate a food pantry on the grounds of Mount Loretto. Most Pure Heart of Mary Convent on Staten Island was dedicated this past August 15. Sisters substitute teach in Saint Aloysius School which they formerly staffed, volunteer on community boards and teach parish religion classes.

“We are bridge builders,” Sister Loretta Theresa observes, “who realize the many needs of our brothers and sisters in this country and in Africa, the country from which our people came.” Sister Loretta Theresa says the sisters consider their order “a bridge between white and black people in the church.” In the 1960s, when many of her classroom students were white, Sister says she felt that she was building a bridge between the races “by helping them accept and respect our people.”

Though Harlem itself is changing and Saint Benedict’s Day Nursery classes now include a diverse ethnic and class mix, the mission of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, founded in Savannah to thwart a law that never passed, remains the same. They are still peacefully building bridges.

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Rita H. DeLorme

Archdiocese of Atlanta to Celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., January 19-20

The Office for Black Catholic Ministry of the Archdiocese of Atlanta has announced the 2008 Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration, to be held January 19-20.

The annual observance of the King Holiday will begin with the 24th annual Eucharistic Service commemorating the Christian witness of Dr. King on Saturday, January 19, at 1:00 p.m. at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, 48 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive in downtown Atlanta.

The public is invited to participate in this solemn occasion. The Principal Celebrant for the Eucharistic Service will be Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory. Father

Bruce Wilkinson, pastor of Most Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in southwest Atlanta, will deliver the homily.

The theme for this year’s celebration is, “Guide Our Feet into the Way of Peace,” taken from the Gospel of Luke (1:78-79).

On January 20, the celebration will continue at 3:00 p.m. with the 6th Annual MLK Youth Celebration at Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School.

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