

Our Foundress

Mother Alfred (Maria Catherine) Moes

If you have the opportunity to visit Remich, Luxembourg, take notice of the Church of St. Stephen. It was here that Maria Catherine, the youngest of ten children born to Gerard and Anna Marie Botzem Moes was baptized on the day she was born, October 28, 1828. Then, as now, you will meet townspeople who remember the Moes family, renowned for wrought ironworks and grape vineyards besides being leaders of the city and protectors of the castle.

On one occasion, Bishop John Martin Henni from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, preached of the great need for teachers in the United States, especially among the Native Americans. The Moes sisters, Maria Catherine and Catherine, were greatly inspired by Bishop Henni's plea. On September 27, 1851, they left behind a prosperous life and family in Luxembourg and set sail from LeHavre, France, for New York City. The sisters were well educated both at home and at the convent school. Besides their unwritten Luxembourg language, they spoke and studied in French, German and English. Their knowledge of mathematics, music, art and architecture would serve them well as pioneers in their chosen land.

From 1852 – 1863, the Moes sisters traveled in Wisconsin, eventually living with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Milwaukee, then with the Marianites of the Holy Cross, South Bend, Indiana, where they were professed as Sister Alfred and Sister Barbara. When given the option to move on from Holy Cross, Sisters Alfred and Barbara Moes, Bernard Peacard and Alberta Stockhoff were accepted into the Franciscan Third Order Regular on June 1, 1863.

A few months later on November 4, 1863, Sister Alfred and her companions began teaching in St. John the Baptist School in Joliet, Illinois, at the invitation of the pastor, Reverend Carl Kuemin, a diocesan priest from Chicago. They were the first Franciscan Sisters in the state of Illinois.

When lightning struck St. John the Baptist Church and killed Philomena Hartmann on July 31, 1864, John Hartmann turned to the new Sisters to raise his children. Care of orphans began as a very unexpected ministry for Mother Alfred and her Sisters. With very little living space, Mother Alfred and her pioneer group managed to care for the children, take in boarding students and begin training girls to become Sisters. The original rented house still stands in Joliet behind St. John the Baptist Church.

By March of 1864, Mother Alfred and her Sisters purchased a slightly larger house on Division Street in Joliet. Eventually this house would become St. Francis Academy, and later the first St. Joseph Hospital under the auspices of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Father Pamfilo da Magliano, a Franciscan Friar, called Mother Alfred and her first postulant to St. Bonaventure, in Allegany, New York. There on August 2, 1865, the Feast of Our Lady of Angels, (Portiuncula) he named Mother Alfred Moes as the first General Superior of the new Congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, in Joliet, Illinois. On that same day, Mary Ann Rosenberger, the first postulant, became Sister Angela. Sister Angela would eventually become Mother Angela in 1893.

Mother Alfred and her Sisters continued caring for the orphans and teaching the girls at St. John School. On October 2, 1869, St. Francis Academy opened, which attracted girls from age three through 20 from across the United States. Mother Alfred was willing to send Sisters wherever the need arose. Many pastors were begging especially for Sisters to teach in languages such as German, French, Czech, Slovak and Polish. Sister John Rooney was set to open the first Slovak Catholic School in Streator, Illinois. During the eleven years of her administration, Mother Alfred sent Sisters to 36 different locations: 17 in Illinois, 10 in Ohio, 5 in Missouri, 2 in Tennessee and 2 in Wisconsin.

Two well-known adventures of Mother Alfred include her visit in person to aid the victims of the Great Chicago fire in October 1871. The second took place in October 1873, when she traveled to Memphis, Tennessee at the time of the yellow fever epidemic. Mother Alfred arrived too late as the lives of two Sisters had already been claimed through the epidemic.

Mother Alfred's educational endeavors met with great success. She had planned an extensive new St. Francis Academy located in Joliet where Nowell Park is today. Bishop Foley did not approve of the plans and ordered the Sisters to vote for a new General Superior. Sister Alberta Stockhoff, an original companion of Mother Alfred, filled the office for one year. Mother Alberta commissioned Mother Alfred to build the Academy of Our Lady of Lourdes in Rochester, Minnesota, at the request of Bishop Grace. Shortly after this Academy opened, Bishop Foley separated Mother Alfred from the Joliet Congregation. He also had Mother Francis Shanahan, the General Superior, inform the Sisters of the separation. Within ten days, the Sisters had to decide whether to remain with the Joliet Congregation or join the new community in Rochester. Ninety-two Sisters continued as Joliet Franciscans; twenty-five became the nucleus of Mother Alfred's new foundation in Rochester.

Our Lady of Lourdes Academy and several other schools under Mother Alfred's direction were flourishing in Minnesota, when on August 21, 1883, a tornado ravished the area. Mother Alfred and her Sisters opened their schools to the victims. After this experience, Mother Alfred recognized the great need for a hospital. She petitioned Dr. Mayo to plan and staff a hospital at the expense of the Sisters. Within a few years, on September 30, 1889, Mother Alfred opened St. Mary Hospital, Rochester, Minnesota, which eventually became the renowned Mayo Clinic.

Although Mother Alfred died in St. Paul, Minnesota, on December 18, 1899, her ministry, as that of St. Francis of Assisi, "to rebuild the church" continues to this day by the Congregations known as "Al's gals."

- The Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, Joliet, IL
- The Sisters of St. Francis of Our Lady of Lourdes, Rochester, MN
- The Sisters of St. Francis of Our Lady of Lourdes, Sylvania, OH
- The Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Louis, MO
- Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, NY

In the spirit of Mother Alfred Moes, these Franciscan women carry on a heritage of simplicity, versatility and ingenuity in responding to the needs of God's people, wherever they are called.