



# **LOVE & LEARNING**

**School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Educational Vision  
by  
Miriam Jansen, SSND**

a presentation given in 2002  
that continues to hold relevance today

The spiritual energy and moral purposes of our institutions are rooted in the soil and tradition of Theresa Gerhardinger, the foundress of our congregation. All of us can claim a relationship with her and her educational ministry. All of us have been given a share in her vision.

Theresa's story is a story of love! God's love was looking for new ways of breaking into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The gifting of Theresa was really the in-breaking of God's love. Her total availability to God allowed this in-breaking to flow through her onto her world. Her mission to bring this love to the world found expression in her ministry directed toward education. God used her to gift the world with love. This gifting has moved through our history since 1833. It has moved through some 22,000 vowed members and thousands of others with whom we work.

The originating graces of our story can be found in key shaping experiences from our early years: the coming together of historical events; the closing of the Stadtamhof school; the influence of Pestalozzian pedagogy; the need for education of poor girls; the profound influence of Bishop Whitman both as a staunch educator, lover of the poor, and sainted pastor; the support of a small circle of like-minded friends; the first lay teachers; and the spiritual vision of Father Job as penned in the first rule book. All of these shaping experiences evolved into a kind of education that brought together a pedagogy of idealism and a Gospel vision of the person.

Mother Theresa elaborated a form of education that grew out of her profound grasp of God's meaning toward her and toward others. God was the center of life, the center of her longing, her way of being with others, the center of her suffering, the center of her joy. Her singleness of purpose allowed her to grasp God's love for her and others that gave shape to her education vision. She had a philosophy of education but even more she had a theology of education. Education was not conceived as a theory to be learned but as a person to be learned. The God she knew she wanted others to learn about. Love and learning merged! The school became her workshop for bringing God's love to the children. It seems to me that's the heartbeat

of the vision. This is the vision that has made its way through our history. This is the melody that played upon her soul. It's the echo that we hear today.

For Mary Theresa of Jesus contemplation and ministry shared an intimate relationship. There were only blurred distinctions. The transforming power of God moved through her. Her vision of God was the driving force of her dreams. It was full of creative power, a wellspring of hope. The dramatic breakthroughs of her ministry were really dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred, of God at work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Theresa's love for God could wait no longer. Her heart was set on the kingdom. Out of this experience of love meeting love grew the soul of the congregation—our charism. It was God's love touching her life and her total response that became a pure beam of light for the world. These pure beams of sunlight, of grace, are the wellsprings of our spirituality and our prayers so we can be the living charism in our moment in history. It was grace given and received. She did not possess the gifting: it possessed her. It was her prophetic moment. Her story is, indeed a narrative resurrection; it defies an intellectual explanation. The soul of the congregation was born and grew in her.

We can never fully capture our charism in any historical time. We never see the total. As earth people our vision is limited; we only get glimpse, only reflections of pure beams of light. It is when we reflect on our founding story, on the first community, their responses to the needs of their times, that we discover the profound intention of our being together NOW. We are called to take this founding dream, this sacred energy, this power and hold it freely, authentically, and honestly so it can have a future. We can't afford to hold it too tightly or we will snuff out its life. We must hold it freely.

The charism functions in a rational way through the institution. In order for the Spirit to work in the community it must be embodied in some corporate effort. The institution makes the charism available for people and for action. The institution tries to harness the charism and it never does. So we need to keep going back to those root experiences to keep rationalizing it so we can keep it meaningful.

Key to any idea of institution is the goal to make sure there is a tomorrow. But once we institutionalize something, an idea, a charism we always run the risk of subverting it, making it backward looking, intent only on preserving the past. But that's not the proper role of institutional behavior. Exaggerated institutionalism can lead to serious problems. We need to keep the charism available to people so we need to keep reconsidering it, checking it out. The charism is never fully captured in any one moment of history; it shows itself differently at different historical times, much like the prism. The congregational charism places itself, its energies, at the service of the world. It has a future orientation. The structure Mother Theresa put around her originating vision was meaningful for her times. It matched her experience. Over time we see it being imbedded in new ways all over the world.

Mother Theresa was responding to the Industrial Age. We are responding to an informational, technological, global one. So, we're faced with the challenge of finding ways to integrate the achievement of our times with the broader moral and spiritual dimension. We have a key contribution to make in guiding persons toward this transformation. A movement toward the spiritual is a movement toward transformation, a movement toward integration is a movement of all toward oneness in God. We return to our charism to see that we are here to make one, to bring all to oneness in Jesus. All of the history, all of the change, all of the suffering, all of the violence, cannot keep love, compassion, and understanding from reemerging. Our documents have helped us reconceptualize our charism and keep it meaningful for our times.

Shortly after John XXIII called the Church to re-examine itself in light of the growing and rapidly changing world, we were called to return to our roots, renew ourselves, and adapt to the signs of the times. This challenge allowed us to reconceptualize our call to service in a changing world and found new expression in our service.

Our charism has a great deal to contribute to our age. We've lived through several major social transformations. The richness of our 160 plus years still speaks to the cries of the human community. We have a bigger job to do than Theresa took on in Stadthamhof. Today we're

teaching to global unity, the promotion of human dignity, trying to bring the Gospel to bear on our reality and our systems.

No one can say precisely what shape the future will take. We do know that we are launched on a journey into uncharted waters with great elements of uncertainty. The deepest dangers and the most exciting prospects for the future are not found in the external environment but in the human heart. Can we come to terms with the world we have created? The task is clear: we are to create a more just and humane world. We must become more human not less human. We must not only help people make a living; we must help them make a life.

The spiritual doctrine of our lives finds expression in our service. The documents are our blueprints. They attempt to keep the charism meaningful for our times. Like Theresa and Caroline we bring the Gospel to bear wherever we are. The whole world is our classroom, our workplace. We are looking at our institutions with a view to adapting the to a world in the midst of great change. We are confronted with the questions: "How are we to read the Gospel today? What is asked of us as educators who are called to 'make one?'" Given the current state of the world how do we bring learning and love together? If education is proclamation, what must we proclaim?"

To "make one" is the story of the Gospels. To bring all to oneness in God is the mission of Theresa and it is our hope for the future. This guiding principle serves as the backbone of our vision for education. We are signs, symbols, and servants of a kind of unity that affirms peace through justice. We witness and work at bringing people together and teaching to this end. Animating this vision and providing a new dynamism to this call is a breakthrough moment.

When we affirm community we affirm peace. Peace is found among and between people and comes only with justice. Our corporate thrust must be more human and more spiritual where the dimensions of peace and justice are central and essential to what students learn and how they experience life with others. Education for peace and justice is not possible without a caring community. We are setting our feet in a direction that builds peace through an education that fosters a more just and truly human world.

We've been reflecting on our founding vision. Our everyday choices must resonate at a deep level with our Mission and Vision. Walter Brueggemann in the *Prophetic Imagination* says, "The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined."

What does this vision hold for us in our sponsored institutions? How is it unfolding? How can we make it available to the future? It's in the clarity of our imaginations that we see a way to walk with new courage and renewed faith. We need to find the unexpected in-breaking of where God may be leading us. We need to focus on the points of innovation, discontinuities, breakpoints in the waves. Our collective hunches can become the new leaven, the new fire. We are the carriers of the vision!

Mother Caroline said it well, "Lovingly reflect on the present situation as the will of God and embrace it willingly." These times are blessed; they're graced and privileged. So let's not be afraid. Let's push out the boundaries of how we have defined ourselves and respond to the demand of our mission in a rapidly changing world context. As Chardin reminds us, "The only task worthy of our efforts is to construct the future." We are playing on a planetary commons and our commitment must be to a global generation.

Today we've stopped and reflected on Mother Theresa and Mother Caroline's memory. We must invoke their help. Imagine how many times Mother Theresa and Mother Caroline talked to one another and prayed together to know the future. They could not predict it nor produce it but they lived in its promises. We have a captivating, bold and courageous history. It offers us a legacy of hope. That spiritual energy resides in us, in our institutions, in our faculties and staffs. It is our gift for the future.

## PROFILE

Sister Miriam Jansen has served as both teacher and administrator in a variety of educational settings. Recently she completed 19 years of service as director of international programs at Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore. S. Miriam has a special interest in SSND education and has led SSND educational conferences throughout North America and internationally.

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Cover Photo: Sculpture of the young Mother Theresa in front of the Motherhouse of the Central Pacific Province, St. Louis, Missouri