

Notre Dame Congregations with Common Roots

Congregation of Notre Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine (CND-CSA)

Congrégation Notre-Dame/Chanoinesses de Saint Augustin (CND-CSA)

The Congregation of Notre Dame was founded in 1597 by St. Peter Fourier (1565-1640) and Blessed Alix LeClerc (1576-1622) in Mattaincourt in the Duchy of Lorraine, which is now a part of France. All the congregations described in this paper trace their origins to St. Peter Fourier and Blessed Alix LeClerc and continue to keep their charism alive today.

St. Peter Fourier wrote a provisional rule for the sisters, which was based on the rule of St. Augustine and later developed into the *Little Constitutions* that were published in 1617. The Congregation of Notre Dame was approved by the Holy See in 1628 and given the additional title, Canonesses of St. Augustine, which confirmed that it was an apostolic congregation whose members were recognized as both teachers and women religious. St. Peter Fourier completed the *Great Constitutions*, also known as the *Notre Dame Rule*, just before his death in 1640. This rule was approved by Pope Innocent X in 1645.

When Blessed Alix LeClerc died in 1622, the congregation consisted of 13 autonomous houses whose members supported one another and were united by the same charism and rule. Many convents were established in what is now France and some in what is now Germany. The sisters usually opened a boarding school for girls. A free school that was accessible to all, including poor girls, was always connected with these convents. These schools were appreciated and well attended.

After difficult beginnings, the convents experienced a somewhat peaceful development in the seventeenth century, but the increasing attitude against the Church toward the end of the eighteenth century also had an effect on the Congregation of Notre Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine. By 1789, there were 80 autonomous houses and more than 4,000 sisters. Not a single house in France survived the French Revolution, but the sisters continued to provide for the Christian education of girls in secret.

Beginning in 1803, the former convents in France were gradually reopened, either in the original cities or elsewhere, so that by 1901, there were 31 houses with 120 sisters in that country. Religious persecution in 1903-1904 destroyed these houses, however, and the exiled sisters found refuge in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, where they had the opportunity to found new convents and schools. From these convents, new foundations were made, eventually in France again, as well as in 12 other countries of Europe, South America, Southwest Asia, and Africa. No foundations were ever made in North America.

Today there are two branches of the congregation that maintain close connections with one another, the Congregation of Notre Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine (CND-CSA) and the Federation of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (CBMV). These two branches emerged in the twentieth century as a result of the differing structural developments of the congregation in France (centralized government) and in Germany (autonomous convents), as well as changes in Canon Law that were published in 1917.

Federation of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (CBMV)

Föderation der Congregatio Beatae Mariae Virginis (CBMV)

In 1640, the year St. Peter Fourier died, the first convent of the Congregation of Notre Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine in the German states was founded in Trier where St. Peter Fourier had been ordained a deacon and then a priest. This was followed by the establishment of 13 other convents in the German states, including the convent in Stadtamhof, Bavaria, which was founded in 1732.

During the Secularization in the early nineteenth century, nine convents, including one in Stadtamhof, Bavaria, were considered beneficial to the public due to their educational ministry and were allowed to remain open on a limited basis for a few more years. The convent in Stadtamhof closed in 1809 and the last of the nine in 1816. None of these were ever reopened.

The convents in Trier, Essen, Paderborn, Rastatt, and Offenburg managed to survive the Secularization, and their schools expanded until the German *Kulturkampf* laws in the 1870s brought this ministry to an end. Sisters were expelled from their convents, and some went to other countries. The sisters in Trier went to Belgium and established their convent in Jupille, now in the city of Liege. The sisters in Rastatt went to Austria and established their convent in Goldenstein near Salzburg. The convent in Offenburg barely survived. After the effects of the *Kulturkampf* lifted in the late 1880s, sisters returned to Essen and Paderborn, and a new convent was established in Hagen, Westphalia, in 1925.

With the revision of Canon Law in 1917 and of their rule and constitutions, the sisters of the convents in Essen, Paderborn, and Offenburg became more acquainted with each other and joined together in a federation in 1927. The Hagen convent joined in 1933, and the convent in Austria in 1953. After the fall of communism in East Europe, the convent in Bratislava, Slovakia was reopened in the early 1990s and joined the federation. The federation had several names but is now known as the Federation of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (CBMV).

Congregation of Notre Dame (CND)

Congrégation de Notre-Dame (CND)

St. Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700) was born in Troyes, France, where she joined an association of lay teachers known as the External Congregation of Our Lady. This association was sponsored and guided by the members of the Congregation of Notre Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine, who had a house in Troyes. Members of this association lived at home and dedicated themselves to the work of teaching girls who lived in the poor districts of the city and could not afford to attend a convent boarding school.

In 1653, Marguerite responded to the invitation of the governor to help establish a settlement that later became Montreal, Canada. She opened a school and provided social services to those in need. Three other members of the External Congregation of Our Lady joined her, and in 1676, the bishop approved the Congregation of Notre Dame, whose rule was based on St. Peter Fourier's *Notre Dame Rule*. It was among the first congregations of women religious whose members were not bound by the rules of enclosure so that they could teach

poor children who were unable to attend convent schools. Today, members of the Congregation of Notre Dame live and minister in Canada, the United States, Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala), Cameroon, Japan, and France.

School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND)

A house of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame/Canonesses of St. Augustine* was established in Stadtamhof in Bavaria in 1732. Members of this congregation taught girls from the area in the Notre Dame Convent School. Caroline Gerhardinger (1797-1879) was one of the last students at this school before the convent closed in 1809.

George Michael Wittmann, later auxiliary bishop in Regensburg, was concerned about the continued education of girls in his parish. He had been the confessor at the convent and was familiar with St. Peter Fourier's *Notre Dame Rule*. Shortly before he died, he gave a copy of this rule to Caroline and asked her to give it to Francis Sebastian Job, a court chaplain in Vienna. Father Job used this rule as the basis for his work, *Spirit of the Constitutions for the Religious Congregation of Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame*, for the new congregation founded by Caroline in Neunburg vorm Wald, Bavaria, on October 24, 1833.

After Caroline professed her religious vows in 1835, she was known as Mary Theresa of Jesus.¹ A few months later, six women were received into the new congregation, dedicated to the renewal of society by providing young women and girls a Christian education. When the motherhouse was dedicated in Munich in 1843, the congregation numbered 96 sisters and 31 candidates, who lived in the motherhouse and 14 branch houses in Bavaria. The sisters followed Father Job's *Spirit of the Constitutions* and, as far as possible, St. Peter Fourier's *Notre Dame Rule* until their congregation's own rule was given final approbation in 1865.

In response to a call to serve German immigrants in North America, Blessed Theresa, four sisters, and a novice crossed the Atlantic in 1847 and established in Baltimore. American women entered the congregation in increasing numbers, and in 1850, a motherhouse was opened in Milwaukee by Mother Caroline Friess, Blessed Theresa's representative in North America. Mother Caroline guided the congregation in North America until her death in 1892, when there were more than 2,000 sisters in over 200 houses in the United States and Canada.

In 1848, Blessed Theresa returned to Europe, the congregation grew, and sisters were called to several other European countries. Blessed Theresa died in Munich May 9, 1879, and was mourned by more than 2,500 School Sisters of Notre Dame in Europe and North America.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the congregation was made up of 7 provinces, and by 1939, there were 10 provinces in Europe and 5 in North America. The bonds of unity within the large congregation were strengthened despite the turbulent times that led to World War II and its aftermath. In December 1944, the motherhouse in Munich was destroyed, but by the time it was rebuilt and dedicated in 1956, it had already been decided to transfer the generalate from Munich to Rome the next year.

¹ Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger was beatified in Rome on November 17, 1985, and is referred to here as Blessed Theresa.

Before and after WWII, Sisters continued to respond to calls to serve in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Vatican Council II took place when the congregation numbered close to 12,000 sisters. They participated in the renewal of religious life and the formulation of a new constitution. After a twenty-year process, the new rule, *You Are Sent*, was formally approved by the Holy See on March 25, 1986. Today, just under 2,000 School Sisters of Notre Dame in 8 provinces in 28 countries on 5 continents are responding to critical global concerns and living into a prophetic witness of universal communion.

Congregation of the School Sisters de Notre Dame

Kongregace Školských sester de Notre Dame

Notre Dame Sisters (ND)

In 1851, School Sisters of Notre Dame began teaching in Hirschau, a small town in Bohemia, located in the Austrian Empire. It is now known as Hyršov in the Czech Republic. The parish priests, the bishop of Budweis, and Blessed Theresa hoped that this would be the beginning of many future SSND missions in Bohemia and, before long, there were novices from Bohemia in the novitiate in Munich. The government would not sanction a religious house in Austria that was subject to a religious house in Bavaria, however, and this caused problems with the government and led to the desire to separate the house in Bohemia from the motherhouse in Munich.

At the same time, Blessed Theresa was working on the compilation of a rule specifically for the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Carl August von Reisach, the archbishop of Munich, disagreed with Blessed Theresa on the concept of having one general superior in charge of all the houses of the same congregation that were located in several dioceses and even in several countries. For almost two years, among other things, the archbishop of Munich would not allow any novices in the congregation to profess their vows. After spending some time in the novitiate in Munich, the novices from Bohemia returned to Hirschau in order to teach there while waiting to profess their vows. The parish priest in Hirschau, Father Gabriel Schneider, wanted the novices to profess their vows in Hirschau.

Blessed Theresa could not agree to having a motherhouse and novitiate opened in Hirschau because it was too remote and did not have sufficient financial backing to support itself. On the other hand, she was willing to have the novices return to Munich for profession as soon as the rule was approved and the archbishop would give his permission. This took longer than expected, with the result that all but one professed School Sister of Notre Dame who was in Hirschau returned to Munich, and the house in Hirschau separated from Munich.

On August 15, 1853, a new, independent congregation was founded by Father Gabriel Schneider (1812-1867) in Hirschau, known as the Poor School Sisters de Notre Dame. The novices followed a rule based on the *Notre Dame Rule* written by St. Peter Fourier. A year later, the motherhouse of this new congregation was moved from Hirschau to Horaschtowitz (now Horažďovice), and from there the congregation quickly spread throughout Bohemia.

In 1910, the first sisters left for America, where they ministered first in Fenton, Missouri, and later in Omaha, Nebraska. Houses were soon opened in Nebraska and several neighboring states. Today these sisters are known as Notre Dame Sisters (ND).

On October 28, 1918, Bohemia became a part of the newly established country of Czechoslovakia. On August 15, 1930, the congregation was divided into four provinces: České Budějovice (formerly Budweis) with its motherhouse in Horažďovice, Mariánské Lázně (formerly Marienbad) in Czechoslovakia, Prague in Czechoslovakia, Omaha in Nebraska. In 1939, the Slovakian Province was formed with its motherhouse in Nové Mesto nad Váhom in Czechoslovakia.

The borderlands of Czechoslovakia were occupied by Germany in 1938. Sisters in the borderlands were dismissed from state schools, and educational institutions belonging to the congregation were closed. A year later, all religious in the country experienced the same fate and ministered in a variety of ways for the duration of the war.

After World War II ended in 1945, 189 sisters were among the millions of German people who were forced to leave the country, and many of these sisters took refuge with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Bavaria. In the 1947 SSND directory, at least 50 sisters are listed as "(G.) = (Guest Sister from the Congregation of the School Sisters de Notre Dame, Marienbad in the Sudeten District)." Some "Guest Sisters" were still listed in the 1951 SSND directory. On August 15, 1953, a new provincial motherhouse for this group of School Sisters de Notre Dame of German descent was dedicated in Auerbach, Bavaria, and replaced the one in Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad).

The communists took over the government in Czechoslovakia in 1948. All religious houses were confiscated in 1950, and the sisters were sent to work in factories or on farms, to care for handicapped adults, or to live out their last years in large houses in remote border areas of the country. Forty years passed before religious were allowed to live and minister in public again. The congregation's generalate is now located in Hradec Králové in the Czech Republic.

Kalocsa Congregation of the School Sisters of Our Lady

Miasszonyunkról Nevezett Kalocsai Iskolanővérek Társulata

Celestine Franz (1825-1911) was one of the first women to enter the new independent congregation of the School Sisters de Notre Dame in Hirschau and was given the name Theresa when received on August 15, 1853. Sister Theresa professed her vows on October 29, 1854, and soon was elected unanimously the general superior of the new congregation. During the next few years, Mother Theresa Franz opened eight houses of the congregation, one of them in Prague.

In 1857, the archbishop of Kalocsa, Hungary, Joseph Kunszt, asked Mother Theresa Franz to send sisters to Kalocsa. After long negotiations, Mother Theresa, seven sisters of German descent, and five Hungarian novices left Bohemia for Kalocsa on September 3, 1860. In contrast to the poor convents and schools in Bohemia, nothing was lacking in the beautiful new convent and school in Kalocsa. Archbishop Kunszt had provided everything for the sisters.

Instead of returning to the motherhouse in Horažďovice, Mother Theresa Franz stayed with her sisters in Kalocsa. Various reasons are given for this decision. According to one source, sisters of German descent were no longer welcome in Bohemia, and Mother Theresa Franz was a native of Dresden, Germany. Another source states that there was a plan to make the convent in Kalocsa the motherhouse of the congregation in place of the existing motherhouse in Horažďovice. This

was not accepted, however; the sisters in Hungary separated from the congregation in Bohemia, and a new congregation was established, the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady.

There was an abundance of work in the teaching and training of girls and young women in the large archdiocese of Kalocsa. Hungarians, Germans, Croatians, Serbians, and others lived together in the towns and villages and had a very good relationship with each other. The children grew up speaking two or even three languages. Many young women entered this new congregation, and the sisters taught in an increasing number of schools, institutes, and kindergartens. When Mother Theresa Franz died on June 24, 1911, the congregation had 25 houses in Hungary.

After World War I, the Treaty of Trianon (1920) defined the borders of the new Kingdom of Hungary, which was one of the successor states from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Approximately two-thirds of the land that had belonged to Hungary was assigned to neighboring countries as shown on the maps below. Two-thirds of the houses of the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady were located in Yugoslavia (today in Serbia) and thus cut off from the motherhouse and the sisters in Hungary.



Countries named as they were in 1920



Countries named as they are in 2019

(Source of maps unknown)

In the 1920s, Jesuit missionaries from Hungary asked the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady to send sisters to China. Missions were opened in Tamingsien (1926), Puyang, (1930), Taming (1931), and Kingsien (1940). Young women from China entered the congregation. During World War II (1939-1945), the sisters also worked in Hunan. After World War II, religious congregations in both Hungary and China were disbanded.

Changes in China: With the change of government in China in 1949, all foreign missionaries were expelled from the country. The Hungarian sisters went to Australia, and some ended up in Canada. The Chinese sisters who survived the upheaval were forced to return to their families and marry to prove that they had renounced religious life. One sister was imprisoned for many years, but after she was released, she was able to re-establish the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady in China in 1978.

Changes in Hungary: In 1950, the School Sisters of Our Lady of Kalocsa were disbanded by the government and all their houses confiscated. Some sisters were able to leave the country and live as women religious in other parts of the world. Most remained faithful to their religious vows and lived among the people in Hungary, making their living in whatever way possible. This continued

until 1989, when it was once again possible for religious to live in community, teach in schools, and minister among the people in Hungary.

Bačka Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady
Miasszonyunkról Nevezett Bácskai Nővérek Társulatának

When Mother Theresa Franz, the general superior of the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady, died on June 24, 1911, two-thirds of the houses were located in Bačka in Southwest Hungary, now known as Serbia. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon signed in 1920, communications were cut off between the houses in Bačka and the motherhouse in Kalocsa, Hungary. In 1930, the Holy See made the sisters in Bačka an independent congregation, the Bačka Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady, with its motherhouse in Sobotica and Mother Anunciata Kopunovic as its superior.

Due to the annexation of Bačka by Hungary in 1941, the houses of the new congregation in Bačka were rejoined with the houses of the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady in Hungary. About 20 sisters who were of Croatian or other Slavic descent, however, fled with their general superior, Mother Anunciata Kopunovic, to Zagreb in what is now Croatia, and the congregation founded in 1930 continued under the name, the Zagreb Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady.

By the end of 1944, Bačka was again ruled by the Yugoslav government. Soon the schools in Bačka were nationalized and the convents closed. After many years, the sisters who were still there were allowed by the government to teach religion and carry out pastoral ministries and other services in dioceses and parishes.

In 1960, the Holy See declared that the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady in Bačka would be an independent province under papal jurisdiction and in 1971, an independent congregation, the Bačka Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady. The rule and constitutions of this congregation, based on those of St. Peter Fourier and revised according to the norms of Vatican II, were finally approved by the Holy See on February 11, 1988.

Zagreb Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady (DSNG)
Družba Sestara Naše Gospe - Zagreb

During World War II, a part of Bačka was annexed by Hungary in 1941, and the houses of the Bačka Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady were rejoined with the houses of the Kalocsa School Sisters in Hungary.

About 20 sisters who were of Croatian or other Slavic descent fled with their general superior, Mother Anunciata Kopunovic, to Zagreb in what is now Croatia, and the congregation founded in 1930 continued under the name, the Zagreb Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady. These sisters shared the fate of all women religious in Yugoslavia during and after World War II.

This congregation reveres Blessed Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger as one of its founders. Sister Benilda Dix's biography, *Love Cannot Wait*, has been translated into Croatian under the title, *Ljubav ne moze cekati*.

Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame (Bad Niedernau, Germany)

Arme Schulschwestern von unserer lieben Frau (Bad Niedernau)

Beginning in November 1944, convents in Yugoslavia, including those of the Kalocsa School Sisters of Our Lady and the Zagreb Sisters of Our Lady, were confiscated by the government, and teaching sisters were dismissed from the schools. Sisters who were of German descent fled to Germany where their relatives and neighbors had already settled. These sisters then decided to come together, live in community, and continue their ministries in their new land.

A house in Bad Niedernau in Baden-Württemberg, Germany was purchased in 1957 and became their motherhouse. The next year, the sisters opened a school for children from East Europe who had fled to Germany and needed assistance with the German language. Later, a sanatorium with healing waters in Bad Niedernau was acquired in order to provide the sisters with a place of ministry and a means of support.

Four novices professed their vows in the early 1960s. On March 23, 1974, the Congregation of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame (Bad Niedernau) was approved by the Holy See as an independent congregation.

In all, there were approximately 30 members of this congregation. As the sisters grew older, ministries became fewer. According to a newspaper article, only one sister was still living in November 2017. The youngest and smallest of the Notre Dame Congregations with common origins was instrumental in bringing together the nine congregations described here.

During the 1983 Munich celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, General Superior Sister Mary Margaret Johanning read a newspaper article about the School Sisters of Notre Dame which was correct in all historical facts, but which named Sister Mechtildis Eichinger as the general superior. While investigating the background of this article, she "discovered" the Notre Dame Sisters of Bad Niedernau, Germany, and through them became aware of several groups of Notre Dame Sisters. (SSND General Superior Sister Patricia Flynn, Circular 64/95, November 21, 1995)

Prepared by
Mary Ann Kuttner, SSND, archivist
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