

Women and Social Concerns

By S. JUDITH METZ

Mid-19th century was a time of dynamic change and growth in American society. In this climate a plethora of religious and social reform movements swept through the culture. Women were active in both organizing and working for a number of causes. The temperance movement was among the most

popular, since it dealt with an issue that touched many families. Dorothea Dix was the leading light in working to improve the treatment of criminals and the insane. The abolition movement attracted Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Sojourner Truth, and Quakers such as Lucretia Mott. A factor in the launching of the women's suffrage movement was women's recognition of their own marginalization

During the 150th anniversary year each issue of Intercom will focus on a particular ministry or cultural area, highlighting Sisters who were pioneers in the field, and some who continue their rich history of caring and excellence.

in the very organizations working for social reform. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony organized the first women's rights convention in 1848, followed closely by others, including one in Ohio in 1850.

An aspect of social reform in which religious and benevolent organizations were especially involved was providing relief and places of refuge for the poor.

Municipalities often sponsored almshouses and provided some assistance for the poor in their homes but, as is the case today, this was often given grudgingly and under stringent stipulations. Relief provided by private organizations was more readily available and generously given. In 1851 in Cincinnati there were four orphan asylums, The Widow's Home, the House of Refuge, the Poor House

and Farm, and the Cincinnati Relief Union, as well as several health care institutions.

The Sisters of Charity had been involved in this aspect of social reform from their inception. The Sisters visited the poor and sick in their homes, cared for orphans and the elderly, and visited public almshouses. From their arrival in Cincinnati they had been engaged in these activities as well as caring for victims of the periodic cholera epidemics that devastated the area.

By mid-century Sisters of Charity cared for nearly 150 girls at St. Peter's Orphan Asylum. Their work quickly expanded when they became a diocesan community in 1852. Within a year St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum and Good Samaritan Hospital opened. These were followed quickly by the Sisters' establishment of the Martha and Mary Society, which organized a cadre of laywomen to care for the sick and poor in their homes.

The Pioneers

S. Blandina Segale
Italian immigrant, multilingualist, educator, nurse, social worker, administrator, parole officer. No single label can describe the indefatigable S. Blandina, who lived till she was 91 by her motto, "Do what presents itself." However, one role especially, social activist, is



exemplified by many courageous episodes of her life, some not as well known as those in her book *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*.

Probably the most famous is her befriending and nursing the wounded member of Billy the Kid's gang (whichever "Billy" this was) when no one else would.

But the social action which precipitated that was her organization of some of her pupils into

the Vigilant Club that "at all times is on the alert to be of service," she wrote. As soon as they told her of the wounded man, she took two members with her to bring him food, water, castile soap, and linens, at the same time training the students to be social activists too.

Moving from Trinidad, Colo., to Santa Fe, N.M., S. Blandina became known for her respect and care for the oppressed, the poor Mexicans and the Indians.

Perhaps their own experiences as Italian immigrants in Cincinnati

gave the Segale sisters, Sisters Blandina and Justina, all the grace they needed to begin the still-thriving Santa Maria Institute in Cincinnati with \$5. Social action was second nature to them as they began program after program for Italian and other immigrants in what is probably the first Catholic settlement house in the United States.

S. Bernard Louise Carroll

S. Bernard Louise's first mission in 1916 was to St. Mary, Jackson, Mich. She was still there during the depression years, and thus became



intimately involved with the problems of the poor. With the blessing of the pastor and her superior, Sister set up a distribution center. Every

day after school, and all day Saturday, she was there to supply bedding, clothes and food to the long line of needy, or she was out soliciting from generous friends, wholesale dealers, Church societies, and the Sisters' own kitchen. The cooperative convent cook, Fanny, had to keep a watchful eye on choice morsels "so that S. Bernard wouldn't carry everything off to her poor children."

This story of one Sister is illustrative of the efforts made by many Sisters of Charity to minister to the poor in the situation in which they found themselves. Whether quietly helping needy students locate resources to continue in school, reaching out to needy families in the parish, or distributing sand-

wiches out the kitchen door to "knights of the road," Sisters were ever alert to serving Christ in the person of the poor.

S. Mary Francelline Ryan

Hattie Ryan applied to join the Sisters of Charity in 1907 only after she was assured

that they conducted orphanages. When her first two assignments involved other work, she was not discouraged. Every year S. Francelline, the former Hattie, pleaded with Mother to fulfill her dream to work

with orphans. Her joy knew no bound when she was assigned in 1924 to the toddlers' division at St. Joseph's Infant Home. With an average of 30 children under her care, she was on duty 24 hours a day for the next 42 years.

A simple, humble person, she loved the ordinary and knew how to create beauty with few resources. Her artistic ability showed in the way she dressed her darlings. Old clothes were mended and dyed bright colors using crepe paper salvaged from the annual festival booths.

Sister's beautiful simplicity and deep spirituality attracted others to her. The unmarried mothers were drawn to her like a magnet and the student nurses were delighted with her Irish wit. Everyone marveled at the individual care and personal interest she bestowed on each child, especially those with handicaps. Her life was a dedication to God and to her little ones.



S. Marie Agnese Bonanno

"We visited every home in the (Holy Name, Cleveland) parish boundaries regardless of religious affiliation," S. Marie Agnese recalled of her initiation into social work in 1933. Ten years later she was one of the pioneers in Cincin-

nati Catholic Charities' School Social Service Program, followed by terms of service at Santa Maria Institute and St. Joseph Infant Home. She came by her efforts in social work naturally. As a youngster she and her siblings often visited the elderly in their Lima, Ohio, neighborhood, bringing them

fruit from her father's store.

This woman, whose eyes often sparkled with humor, warmly reached out with her big heart and her wide vision to children with special needs, to poor families, and to unwed mothers and their babies. No one was beyond her interest and concern.

Hospitals served as the next venue for Sister's ministry. She established a

medical social service department at Good Samaritan Hospital, Dayton, Ohio, in the 1960s and the following decade served at Penrose



Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colo. Her unbounded energy and infectious charm drew many into her warm embrace.

The Followers

S. Rose Elizabeth Bumgarner
"Live simply that others may simply live," said Elizabeth Seton.

For 18 years I had the privilege of being housemother to the women who came to us for help at BETA, a nonprofit agency in Orlando, Fla. BETA stands for Birth, Education, Training and



Acceptance. Many were still in their teens; one was only 11 years old. I baked her twelfth-birthday cake. This alone made a profound mark on my soul.

At BETA they find a home, where they are loved and not judged. One of the requirements is that they attend school, either regular classes or G.E.D. classes.

On Sept. 1, 1998, I retired as housemother, but was asked to become advisor to our mentors and tutors. This was a new challenge for me.

A great deal of time was spent contacting these women and planning in-services for them, so they would know how best to help their young charges.

On July 1, 2002, I began my new life at BETA as a volunteer. So after 21 years working with parents and children I was ready to begin a new life choice — retirement.

My life here at BETA Center has

never been boring. When a former client returns with her child my heart swells. This ministry has been so powerful for me. Now I am retired and a volunteer housemother when needed. So you can see that my heart is, and will always be, with the young women and their children who live in our residence.

S. Barbara Busch

I love to gather together groups of neighbors, teens, first-time homeowners or senior citizens to help them discover the power they already possess within themselves.

Since I founded Working in Neighborhoods, Inc. (WIN) in 1978, I have linked the powerless with the powerful, for example, by building teams of low-income residents of Cincinnati's urban neighborhoods with the city's major banks to negotiate new mortgage policies.

At WIN S. Judy Martinez and I live on the cutting edge of society's toughest problems, using the same process again and again to work methodically toward social justice. We gather together groups of ordinary citizens,

encourage them to speak up about issues that concern them, organize coalitions that share the same issue, do the necessary homework, and use the collective power for change to transform neighborhoods, financial institutions, city or state government, or national priorities.

I sustain my ministry through my sense of humor, relentless

determination, practical, political instincts about the right way to treat people, and my ability to gather other dedicated and diverse people who want to work together to solve the problems they share. I enjoy walking the neighborhoods like South Cumminsville, day by day, engendering hope and sharing my spirituality through persistent, practical action for the poor.

In addition to my ability to initiate long-term changes in the systems that disempower the poor, I keep the staff of committed workers and scores of neighborhood leaders motivated. Together we are working to fight outrageous drug prices for senior citizens, to create summer recreation programs for neighborhood children, and to audit energy use so that low-income/elderly homeowners don't lose their homes to inflated energy costs.

S. Mary Cecilia Eagen

Hospice, nationally and internationally, provides compassionate, comprehensive care to incurably ill patients and their families of all cultures, ethnic background and religions. The hospice movement began in Ireland where Our Lady's Hospice was founded near Dublin by the Irish Sisters of Charity in 1879.

I became interested as a student nurse when the extent of care for terminally ill patients was minimal. I spent 15 years as a pediatric

nurse. During these years I experienced "hospice," although it was not known as such at that time.



My doctoral dissertation, "The Nursing Functions — Role Implications in a Free-Standing Hospice," preceded my honor in developing the hospice curriculum for undergraduate and graduate students at Madonna University, Livonia, Mich., in 1982. This program continues to grow and develop.

The education of these hospice students and this program have touched the lives of many families in the United States, Africa, Australia, China, England, Scotland, Ireland, Israel, the Philippines and other countries.

Thank God for the special gift and privilege in establishing the first and only hospice curriculum.

S. Marie Karen Sammons

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Matt. 25:23

We take this passage from St. Matthew very seriously here at St.

Vincent's Hotel in Dayton, Ohio. It makes us aware that we could be the one in need, but also, keeps us aware that we are able to help the homeless.

One aspect of our ministry is to provide a safe environment for our guests. This can be difficult at times because some of our guests have many fears due to mental illness, drug/alcohol addictions, or physical or emotional abuse. We build a rapport with our guests so they know we are here to help them get any type of assistance they need.

Our guests come in in the evening and receive a hot meal, clean bed and clothing, and personal hygiene items. We wake them at 6 a.m. for breakfast and

provide a brown-bag lunch for them. Then they leave for work, look for work, or meet with one of our case managers. As long as they are working a program with their case manager they may stay with us for one night or however long it takes to find them housing.

While they are with us all of their physical and mental needs are taken care of by us or other social agencies. It is our policy to never turn away single women or families; we are seeing more homeless families.

Working with the homeless is a wonderful ministry. We are blessed in that we have been given so much and we work with those who are much less fortunate. This is what the gospel tells us to do and this is what St. Elizabeth Seton did. ☩

