

SISTER BLANDINA (MARIA ROSA) SEGALE, SERVANT OF GOD

[#1-- portrait photo] S. Blandina Segale — courageous and dauntless, understanding and kind, determined and blunt, with common sense and a sense of humor, dedicated and prayerful — the hallmark of her life was adherence to St. Vincent de Paul's instruction, "do what presents itself."

[#2-- //+caption – church tower in Cicagna] Maria Rosa Segale was born Jan. 23, 1850, in a small mountain village near Genoa. Her parents, Francesco and Giovanna, following their dream for a better future, traveled to the United States in 1854 with their five youngest children, and others from their village. [#3-- //+caption – Cincinnati circa 1854] Settling in Cincinnati, they experienced the poverty and struggles of many newly-arrived immigrants. Their first residence was a one-room apartment at Main and Canal Streets. With the help of friends, Francesco [#4-- Francesco Segale] operated a fruit stand at Front and Sycamore Streets. Within a few years he was able to open a confectionary store and the family purchased a home on West 5th Street. Giovanna cared for the home and looked after the growing family.

The young Maria Rosa attended the Sisters of Notre Dame school on East 6th Street, and was taught by the Sisters of Mercy at Hughes Intermediate School before enrolling at Mount St. Vincent Academy, Cedar Grove, in Price Hill. [#5-- caption – Mount St. Vincent] Here, she received a certificate for completion of the music course. and here she first met the Sisters of Charity. She observed their work among the sick and the orphans, heard their stories of Civil War nursing, [#6-- //+caption – Civil War nurses] and witnessed the departure of four sisters sent to open a hospital and orphan asylum [#7-- 1865 St. Vincent's] in the frontier town of Santa Fe, New Mexico. While a student at Mount St. Vincent, Maria Rosa met Mrs. Sarah Peter who had a great interest in assisting the Italians of Cincinnati. Mrs. Peter, [8-- Mrs. Sarah Peter] recognizing the young student as an Italian, encouraged her to open a catechetical class for the children. Responding to this suggestion, Maria Rosa and her older sister, Maria Maddelena, started a Sunday school in the basement of the Cathedral [#9-- St. Peter's Cathedral] and labored among the Italians.¹

¹ Anna Minogue, The Santa Maria Institute, 43.

Years later, S. Blandina reminisced with her sister, asking, “Do you remember ...when in 1866 the cholera was raging in Cincinnati? You went to a drug store to purchase a disinfectant – half an hour afterwards I entered the same place to make a like purchase. The clerk said to me: ‘Your sister was here a short time ago and asked for a disinfectant. What’s up?’ ‘I want this as a sort of preventive, for, whenever I see a yellow flag, I’m going in to ascertain if I can be of any service.’ When we met, both of us had a hearty laugh over the fact that we were doing the same thing without each other’s knowledge, and both had forgotten, after visiting a few patients, to use the disinfectant!”²

When Maria Rosa graduated from Mount St. Vincent, in 1866, at the age of 16, she joined the Sisters of Charity and became S. Blandina. [#10-- //+caption pic with family] Her beloved older sister, Maria Maddalena, followed soon after and became S. Justina. Together they lived the Sisters of Charity motto, “The charity of Christ urges us,” an expression Sister Blandina reportedly used frequently.³

² Segale, Blandina, *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*, 222-223.

³ “Bulletin of San Antonio Church”, October 7, 2012.

As Sisters of Charity, they saw themselves as carriers of the vision of St. Vincent de Paul, their patron, and St. Elizabeth Seton, their founder, [#11-- Elizabeth Seton] who inspired them with her vision: "To speak the joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the Poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God."⁴

After spending several years teaching in Ohio, S. Blandina requested that she be sent west, "envying the sacrifices the sisters were making who were sent far away to do God's work."⁵ [#12-- //+caption – pic of Santa Fe Trail map] Fearless at age 22, "more pleased at going alone than if I had a dozen with me,"⁶ she traveled over the Santa Fe Trail in 1872. Destination: Trinidad in the Colorado Territory. Her first impression recorded in her journal: [#13-- pic of EOSFT] "I looked at what I would have thought were kennels for dogs."⁷ [#14-- //+caption – "Madam, this is Trinidad,"] Fortified by her deep love of God and her personal motto, "Do what presents itself

⁴ Bechtle, Regina and Judith Metz, Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, 2:62, EAS to Julia Scott, March 23, 1809.

⁵ Segale, 15.

⁶ Ibid. 17.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

and never omit anything because of hardship or repugnance,”⁸ she was initiated into frontier life with all its adventures and dangers.

[#15-- //+detail – pic of four Trinidad Sisters + inset of her]

Joining three other sisters, she taught in the public school that had opened two years earlier. She described her classroom in the public school: [#16-- //+caption – EOSFT drawing] “40 ft. long; 14 ft. wide; 8 ft. high; two small windows, low-sized door, no transom; solid adobe walls on two sides, log rafters as black as ebony. Of necessity ventilation said “Goodbye” when the house was completed.”⁹

This intrepid pioneer had encounters with Billy the Kid [#17-- //+pic – magazine cover and photo], Geronimo, and “frontier justice.” Stories abound of how she dissuaded mobs of armed men from taking the law into their own hands, [#18-- cartoon drawings] and helped criminals seek forgiveness from their victims. She managed unruly students, and formed a Vigilant Committee with them to assist in caring for the poor and needy of the area. She railed against injustices committed by the newly arrived “Anglos” against Native Americans and “Mexicans,” noting in her journal: “Generations to

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

come will blush for the deeds of this, toward the rightful possessors of the soil. Our government, which poses with upraised finger of scorn on any act which savors of tyranny, lowers that finger to crush out of existence a race whose right to the land we call America is unquestioned.”¹⁰

Within a few years of her arrival [1876], seeing the need for a new school building and the lack of funds to build it, she shared an idea, “Here is my plan, Sister,” she recounted, “Borrow a crowbar, get on the roof of the schoolhouse and begin to detach the adobes. The first good Mexican who sees me will ask, ‘what are you doing, Sister?’ I will answer, ‘Tumbling down this structure to rebuild it before the opening of the fall term.’”¹¹ Of course it worked perfectly – many people of the town donated their labor and skills, and soon they had a bigger and better schoolhouse! [#19-- //+caption – Trinidad Public School and St. Joseph Academy]

In 1877 just as her sister, S. Justina, was sent to Trinidad, S. Blandina was missioned south to Santa Fe in the New Mexico Territory where her remarkable activities continued in myriad ways.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

Working in St. Vincent's Hospital and Orphan Asylum, [#20--
 //caption – St. Vincent's in the 1870s] she took on helping at the 'old
 folks home,' assisting in direct relief for the poor, and building a trade
 school for Native American girls. [#21-- 1887 building] Given the
 commission of preparing a musical program, she determined that it
 should be every bit as good as that offered at the Sisters of Loretto
 boarding school which served wealthy families. S. Blandina saw this
 as a way to enhance "growth in character-formation in girls who have
 felt they possess nothing characteristically their own except the
 opprobrious name of 'Charity Girls.'"¹² Noting that her orphans used
 every possible opportunity offered to them, S. Blandina observed
 that, "They do everything with such enthusiasm that it acts as a
 stimulus upon me, and makes me anxious to study each girl and give
 the utmost of myself to evoke the best in her."¹³

Becoming known at every level of society from members of the
 state legislature to indigent patients at St. Vincent's, S. Blandina met
 every challenge. One account describes how they needed a coffin
 room at the hospital "because the sisters were the only ones who
 would bury indigent patients. She helped the 'carpenter' to construct

¹² Ibid., 103.

¹³ Ibid., 104

coffins and, and enlisted recuperating patients from the hospital as mourners.¹⁴ The funeral cortege consisted of ambulatory patients, usually amputees (“work therapy,” said S. Blandina), who lifted the coffin onto a cart. [#22-- old Santa Fe] One of the sisters drove, and all were pallbearers as they stumbled under the weight of the coffin to its final resting place in a lot behind the old St. Michael’s College.

For this service, the county commissioner reimbursed the sisters with a territorial warrant valued at fifteen dollars. When they tried to redeem it, however, they were given only half the amount. The commissioner explained that times were hard; that in government, fiscal prudence was necessary. Sister Blandina knew he would pocket the other half, and her reaction to injustice was always swift.”¹⁵ “So, when the next patient died, she went to the Commissioner and said, ‘in fifteen minutes the corpse will be brought to your office. You can economize as you wish. Good-bye.’ [She] had walked about forty steps when the Commissioner’s voice said, ‘Sister! ... We will allow you \$15.00 for the burial of each poor patient.’”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 139.

¹⁵ Kimball, Clark and Marcus J. Smith, The Hospital at the End of the Santa Fe Trail, 9.

¹⁶ Segale, 151-52.

To raise funds to support their ministries, she and a sister-companion went on begging trips [#23-- mining camp] to mining and railroad camps all over the Southwest, enduring incredible danger and treacherous conditions. Sometimes they met hostility at the camps, but in many cases the Sisters were welcomed by veterans of the Civil War who had been cared for by Sisters on the battlefields or in military hospitals.

After spending four years in Santa Fe, [#24--//+caption – Old Town Square/San Felipe] S. Blandina moved to Albuquerque. Her work continued in Old Town [#25-- //+caption – Blandina with class] where she taught at San Felipe School, established a homeless shelter, [#26-- //+caption – Wayfarer's house] and a Wayfarers' House. She also founded St. Vincent Academy, [#27-- //+caption – SVA] a girls' boarding school that attracted students from all over the Southwest. In the process of her work [#28-- // -- Native American couple] she championed the rights of Native Americans [#29-- // -- crucifix] and attacked the issue of human trafficking, even facing the threat of death.

The intrepid S. Blandina returned to Ohio in 1893, and four years later was sent with [#30-- //+caption – Blandina and Justine] S. Justina “to see if they could do anything for the poor Italian [immigrants]”¹⁷ in the inner city of Cincinnati. Given five dollars to “go and explore the conditions,” these two sisters founded and managed Santa Maria Institute, considered by many the first Catholic settlement house in the United States. As their work began, S. Justina began a series of twenty-one journals [#31-- Santa Maria Journal] recording their experiences: “If it is His [God’s] work,” she wrote, “it will succeed despite opposition—if it is not His work, we do not want it to succeed. But it is manifestly his work, so we do not fear though we have nothing to begin with.”

Starting out in donated space at Third and Lytle, [#32-- 3rd and Lytle building] they later moved to rental space on West 7th Street. Desperately needing a larger facility, Sister Justine wrote, “We found a penny on the street, so that is the nucleus of our funds for the purchase of a house.... A penny and two sisters are nothing. A penny, two sisters and God are omnipotent.”¹⁸ In 1912, fifteen years after they started, they were finally able to purchase buildings on

¹⁷ Santa Maria Journals, J-1.

¹⁸ Ibid.,

West 8th Street [#33-- //+caption+ – West 8th Street buildings] that provided space for the burgeoning list of programs and activities they were sponsoring. [#34-- // -- sewing class] Another nearly 15 years would pass before they were able to move again, this time, in 1926, to 12th and Republic. [#35-- //+caption+ 12th and Republic]

Enlisting assistance from numerous sources, these two women established services of every description to assist the poor and needy. [#36-- baking class] The extent of their activities is more than impressing: elementary schools, Sunday school classes, a day nursery, a kindergarten, a milk station, Boy and Girl Scout Troops, centers for housing for homeless girls and women, Americanization centers, distribution of food, clothing and books, an employment bureau, classes in homemaking, [#37-- lack collar] sewing, singing, dramatics, English, and Braille, and an exhaustive record of visits to homes. [#38-- S. Blandina with family]

When Catholic Charities was being organized, the officials made tours of institutions to evaluate their qualifications for funds. The visitor to Santa Maria asked to inspect the books, at which point Sister Blandina pulled out a little old leather purse from deep inside

her pocket. Opening each of the four compartments, she explained that the first was for rent money, the second for food, the third for clothing, and the fourth for emergency needs. Needless to say, she received suggestions about better bookkeeping methods.¹⁹

As they visited the jails and charity wards in the hospitals, S. Blandina again became involved in the issues of human trafficking and juvenile delinquency. In her book celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the founding of Santa Maria, Anna Minogue observed, "There is not in Cincinnati any organization that has expended stronger efforts for the overthrow of commercialized vice than the Santa Maria Institute."²⁰ She relates how the Sisters centered "an amount of attention" upon Ward O, in the old City Hospital, where "girls and women of the underworld were sequestered." On one visit one of the inmates berated Sister Blandina saying, "You come here trying to help these girls and women, when they are past help. Why don't you instead give your time and effort toward keeping them from getting into these resorts? Why don't you put the agents of the resorts out of commission?" After the woman told Sister Blandina her own tragic story of being recruited from a small town with the promise of a job,

¹⁹ Forde, Victoria Marie, "Getting to Know Our Servant of God," SC Intercom, Winter, 2015, 20

²⁰ Minogue, 117-119.

and finding herself forced into a house of prostitution, Sister Blandina responded by confronting the Madam who operated the house on George Street. The Madam called in the aid of an all-too-willing press, and the following day a headline in the paper that read: [#39-- newspaper clipping] "WOMEN DRESSED IN GARB OF SISTERS OF CHAIRTY – Visited keeper of Resort, and Charged Her With Causing Moral Destruction of Young Girls – Detective Detail to Investigate Queer Story." Due to the notoriety generated by this incident, S. Blandina's superiors requested that she do nothing more in the matter. Her actions, however, had spurred others into action and soon individuals and organizations took up the issue.²¹

As their work grew, the Sisters kept abreast of the latest trends in social work, and kept meticulous records so they could best serve their patrons. They became part of networks of organizations serving the poor, and trained social workers who joined them in their work. [#40-- visiting nurse] In later years they even opened a social work school at Santa Maria.

When the immigrant community spread from downtown to other parts of the city, Santa Maria opened 'branch offices' at the Kenton

²¹ Ibid., 120-125.

Welfare Center in Walnut Hills [1919], and at San Antonio in South Fairmont [1922]. [#41-- San Antonio parade] Interviews with some of the people Sister Blandina served paint a vivid picture of their outreach work:

"We belonged to St. Anthony's church when Sister opened it on Queen City Avenue. [Every Saturday we would sit on the church steps waiting for Sisters Blandina and Justina. We used to help them clean the church [#42-- San Antonio church]..., and when we were finished...she gave us a card. We saved those cards for Christmas because she would take us down to Santa María, and we got our toys with those cards. At Santa Maria I got twin dolls with my tickets. That is the only toy I ever had in my life. I used to carry them under my arms under my coat."

Sister Blandina "had a lot of spice to her. We all loved her. She had a good sense of humor. She was the organizer. She was really something else; she'd say, "Jump," and you'd say, "How far?" She was a little more strict than the others, more demanding. She didn't want you to get out of hand, and you minded her."

"The Sisters, all of them, used to take us in the automobiles to Coney Island one day in the summer. [#43-- newspaper clipping] They got Vitt and Stermer funeral directors to donate cars for transportation. They did everything they could for us."

"Sister helped pay for our books and tuition to St. Bonaventura's School.... She was the one who kept us in school. She took care of everything. To me she was a saint....Sister Blandina loved kids. She took care of all the kids."

In 1931, two years before her retirement, Sister Blandina traveled to Rome, [#44-- // -- St. Peter's] thanks to the generosity of her former students. Prophetically, Alfred Segal, a *Cincinnati Post* journalist, wrote: "Sister Blandina starts back to Italy Sunday after 77 years. Four years old...when she left her native land; at eighty-one she returns. She is going to see the Pope about placing Mother Elizabeth Seton among the Saints, [#45-- Veritas headline] but people say that Sister Blandina is saint enough herself, canonized by sixty years of faithful doing."²²

²² Forde, 20.

During this trip she had the opportunity [#46-- // – plaza in Cicagna] to return to Cicagna, her birthplace, never dreaming that sixty-seven years later [July 11, 1998], the town square would be dedicated to her.

At age 83, Blandina retired to Mount St. Joseph. [#47--// – Motherhouse] Here she prayed and maintained a lively correspondence and visits with her many friends and acquaintances. Sisters who cared for her remember her as loving, kind, thankful, and unassuming, and that she loved to listen to Italian opera on the radio.

Just one month after celebrating her 91st birthday, Sister Blandina died Feb. 23, 1941. [#48-- headstone] It was said that she had instructed 80% of the Italian population who came to Cincinnati.²³

In early 2014 the Archdiocese of Santa Fe [#49-- //+caption – “Servant of God” decree] petitioned Rome to open the cause for the canonization of Sister Blandina. In June the Vatican accepted the petition: she was declared a Servant of God, the first step in the process of being named a saint by the Catholic Church.

²³ “Bulletin of San Antonio Church,” October 7, 2012.

And so the story continues... [#50-- Santos with children] [#51-- Santos "from the most innocent to the most guilty"] [#52-- Roberta's Santos]