

SISTER GRATIA (ANNA) AIGNER, OSB

Born April 7, 1902 - Died September 18, 1982

by Sister Angelica Leviste, OSB

Once Upon A Time

Did you know that once upon a time, St. Scholastica's College had little boys on their campus? Lala Castillo writes: " These little boys were either brothers of Scholasticans then in school, or sons of diehard Scholasticans who felt that having no daughter to give their Alma Mater, they could at least give their sons one or two years of German Benedictine education by enrolling them in the school's kindergarten class."

In charge of the kindergarten for over forty years was a jewel of a nun named Mother Gratia, OSB.

In preparation for our grand Centennial Celebration which will have its climax on December 3, 2006, alumnae board members Elsa Lava Mapua and Jeanette Bautista Zulueta have been tracing "all these boys." Last Friday, June 23, they had their first get-together for a briefing on the activities of the Centennial Year 2006 Celebration.

They came as fathers, businessmen, grandfathers, civil servants, educators – among others, but their thoughts that night zeroed in on the days when they were little boys and how Mother Gratia influenced their lives by simply being herself.

Charge of the Light Brigade !

When ever the little boys and girls saw Mother Gratia come out of the "sisters' house" they would leave behind everything: the sandboxes, their wooden scooters, sand pails, see-saws and swings - and run to Mother Gratia. They would hug her, hide under her white apron, hold her hands, shout "good morning!" -- Some of the naughtier boys would even try to lift her veil to see the mystery underneath. "One day, " little Aris recalls, " we were successful. Her veil fell off, But we were disappointed because there was a bigger white veil below it, which extended down to her shoulders." ("wimple", in clausura terms).

Miss Astrid Perez, kindergarten - partner of Sister Gratia for seventeen years was also there during the get-together. She added: " Sister Gratia was different from the other tall, dignified, serious - looking German nuns. She was always running around with the little girls and boys, playing with them, telling them stories and distributing candies to birthday celebrants. She first made them sing a German nursery rhyme four times (for those who turned four), and five for those who turned five. She distributed the candies one at a time per repetition. She was actually teaching them how to sing, to count, and how to be courteous, because they would say at the end, "Thank you Mother."

"I started teaching as a part-timer, when I was taking my post-graduate course in Social Work at UST in the afternoons," Astrid narrates. "Sister Liguori del Rosario, OSB the directress, asked me to teach in the mornings when I was free. Years later after graduation I knew my niece was in the Kindergarten, So I stayed on for seventeen years. Sister Gratia once introduced me to a friend saying: 'This is Miss Astrid Perez. We have been working together for seventeen years, and we have never quarreled.' In a way that was true," Astrid recalls. " We never had any arguments. Sister

was so kind, but strict. She had a strong German accent. When I made mistakes in class, she would make remarks in German which I did not understand, so I did not feel offended at all. Thus we never quarreled; we understood each other and respected each other.”

During the get-together of Mother Gratia’s boys last week, little Rico admits having had a crush on the petite and pretty Miss Astrid Perez. He recalled how he would sigh and look up to her towering figure. Today, he stands twice the height and size of Miss Perez.

“It wasn’t easy teaching little kids in the beginning. They were all like little “Denis the Menaces”, Miss Perez recalls. “At the end of the morning, I was very exhausted and drained. Sister Gratia also had her little bunch of “Denis the Menaces”, and she too would look exhausted at the end of the day. One day, the naughtiest boy was absent. We got the news that he had died in an accident. There was a hole on the floor of the second storey of their house. The ceiling below was also damaged, and the little boy kept peeping down from the second floor until he fell through the hole, and landed on the first floor. “Poor little one, Sister remarked, “he had to pass through that hole to get to Purgatory.”

Sister Gratia was vibrant with life! She played and ran with the little ones, taught them, and prayed with them. She kept them busy and interested so that they had less time for mischief.

Seeds of Discipline, Precision, Courtesy and Excellence

Every year, there was a field demonstration on the common feast of the Sisters: September 12. The most popular numbers were those of the Kindergarten. They drew the biggest crowd: of mamas and daddies, lolos and lolas, brothers and sisters, cousins, ninangs ninongs and yayas. The success was the result of Sister Gratia’s German discipline, sacrifice and excellence: “whatever we do, must be done well ! “ They had been practicing their numbers since the start of classes in June for the September affair.

For the presentations some were dressed as toy soldiers, others as flowers, and the rest as fruits. Little Paolo remembers being a “rabbit.” In one presentation, way out in front was little Jeanette Bautista who was dressed as “morning dew”. Rows and rows behind was little Gigi (Jesus) Zulueta. He was dressed as a “mushroom”. Little did they know that in God’s loving design, Morning dew and Mushroom were to meet again years later and become Mr. and Mrs. Jeanette and Gigi Zulueta, Jr. Yes, They are happily married with two lovely daughters Regina (18) and Patricia (12).

After morning prayer and “story tellings”, Mother Gratia would tell the little boys and girls to “go to the back, and choose your favorite toys.” At the end of the morning she would tell them to “return them to the exact places where you took them and place them in an orderly way; return what you have borrowed, clean up the places around you and your desks before you leave the room.” She reminded them to say “May I ?” and to greet visitors and elders with “Good Morning” . They learned to say “Thank You”, “Excuse me” and “I am sorry”. During recess, she watched them eat their sandwiches and drink their juice. One over-zealous kinder, however, confessed that he also ate the “baons” of his other classmates. After recess she told them to clean up, wash their hands, and use the bathroom properly. Mark remembers there was a time during the day called “nap time” when they were told to keep quiet and go to sleep. At the end of the day, they all stood at attention, put their hands together, prayed to Jesus, said goodbye and ended with “Amen.”

Vic Badillo later became a Jesuit priest. He is a scientist. An asteroid which he discovered is named after him. He officiated during Sister Gratia's Golden Jubilee of religious profession, on August 15, 1975.

CAMPUS EXPLORATIONS

One morning before recess time, three little boys asked to go to the washroom. They were taking a long time. Sister Gratia started looking for them, they were nowhere to be found. The teachers searched all corners of the kinder area, but to no avail. They went to the other departments, even to the service personnel's workshop area. And lo and behold! The boys were around the pen, watching the pigs and piglets grunt and oink and sway their tails.

Little Maridi raised her hand and asked "Sister, May I go out?" She disappeared and did not come back for the next subject. They searched for her and found her in the Sisters' garden watering the plants with her plastic pitcher.

Little boys enjoyed teasing little girls. They would rush to the swings. But the girls would outrun them. So they had to wait for their turn. How did they while away the time? Little Abreu and companions would intently watch the little girls as they swang up to the air and back, and looked under their little skirts as they swayed up and down with the wind.

On the second day of classes, after meeting Sister Gratia and the many German sisters in the campus, (with their black veils and starched habits), little Teddy excitedly reported to his mom: "Mommy, there are so many blessed virgin mothers in the school!"

SCHOOL OF THE LORD'S SERVICE

Jerry and Ricky remember Mother Gratia as someone who always stood by them. During heavy rains and floods in Singalong, Sister Gratia waited at the pergola until all her little ones were fetched. She sat with them, chatted with them, and even played hide-and-side with them. Sonny and George recalled how they learned to weave colored papers and little baskets, and how to march like German soldiers (goose-steps), They were reminded to be on time for school. Willie recalls "Get up, don't linger in bed...Get ready for school, and don't leave your bed in a mess!" Mother Gratia was always smiling and kind "Her discipline was contagious ", says Phillip. They liked doing the right things which Mother Gratia told them, even if it meant little sacrifices. Deep down, she was laying the foundation of an education based on solid rock - the presence of JESUS in their hearts..

Ed Olaguer remembers Sister Gratia and Sister Irmburg as being so supportive. Later on, during martial law years, when he had to be detained in prison, he deeply appreciated Sister Irmburg's visit. "From them I received my earliest religious education." Former pupil Victor Badillo, SJ wrote: "I'll never forget the days when you led us to Our Lady's Grotto to say the 'Hail Mary'." Many others, too, expressed their gratitude to her for having brought them nearer to God in their early childhood.

SISTER GRATIA - SLEEPING

The Scholastican newspaper reports about how indispensable Sister Gratia was in the Kindergarten. It was during the dreary rainy days in September when there many empty chairs in the kindergarten,

sniffles had attacked the kids. Two days later, when most of them were back, Sister Gratia came down with the flu. “Two postulants were assigned to take her place. In spite of the infinite patience, alertness and youth of the postulants they were unable to cope with their pupils. During recess the boys and girls scampered to the huge swings and shouted alternately, “Sister Gratia – sleeping. Sister Gratia – Sleeping!” Later they went to the offices of the college administration to look for her, but after searching in vain they announced that Sister Gratia was not around, and reiterated “Sister Gratia – sleeping!”

SISTER GRATIA’S MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Sister Gratia loved the little ones and they loved her. She was very much at home with the children. One of the reasons perhaps could have been because she had eight brothers and four sisters. With all thirteen of them living together, their parents knew very well how to handle the “terrible twos and trusting threes, the frustrating fours and the fascinating fives, the sociable sixes to the noisy nines.”

Although thin, Sister Gratia had a strong stamina. She energetically went through her *ora et labora* with and for her little ones. Born on April 7, 1902 in Irlach, Niederbayern in the diocese of Regensburg, Anna was the daughter of Joseph and Therese Aigner. At the age of 21, she left home to answer God’s call and entered the convent in Tutzing on August 2, 1923. After her first profession in 1925 she was assigned to be a kindergarten teacher in Tutzing for six years.

She was sent to the foreign mission on February 4, 1931.. From 1931 to 1971 she taught and eventually became principal of the Kindergarten in SSC. (She was assigned to San Fernando for a year in 1945, and returned to Manila in 1946). She spent another 26 years as SSC’s Kindergarten teacher and later principal..

HER LATER YEARS. . .

After teaching in Kindergarten for 41 years, she suffered from a mild stroke in 1972, which left her half paralyzed. She had a prolonged stay at the UST Hospital. When she returned to SSC, she could not go back anymore to classroom teaching. But her contact with the little ones was not severed. When she could walk a little with a cane, she “supervised” the dismissal of the children at the pergola. The little graders who were under her enjoyed her presence. She made jackstones which had ready buyers among her little ones. She had a ready smile and radiated joy as she sat on the bench, surrounded by children. Later on, her paralyzed limbs and mental strength did not permit her to continue her “supervision” From her place in the Sisters’ choir, she watched the little ones who went to the chapel. In 1979 she was transferred to the Infirmary. She was brought on wheel chair near the door of the chapel where she could attend Mass and be given Holy Communion. But three years later in March 1982, she could no longer receive Holy Communion. She increasingly lost her physical strength and her memory, and later also her power of speech. On September 18, 1982 at 9:05 in the morning, the mother of the “little Scholasticans” for 41 years went back to God.

Back to Him who promised to reward those who instructed His little ones.