



“In Love with the Lord”

This year, the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, were planning to celebrate the 95th birthday and 75th year in vows of their foundress Sr. M. Wilhelmina, O.S.B. But in May, they realized that her death was near. Sister passed quietly unto eternal life on May 29th, the eve of the Ascension. After her death, the community discovered a short autobiography that she had written. In many ways, it is the story of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE which was founded to assist communities and religious like Sister Wilhelmina who were trying to remain faithful to their charisms after Vatican II. Sister Wilhelmina's story also shows that we are never retired from the Lord's service, for she founded a new community as she was over 70 years old! Here is her story with slight editing for brevity's sake.

By Sr. M. Wilhelmina Lancaster, O.S.B.

First of all, I was born Mary Elizabeth Lancaster on Palm Sunday, April 13, 1924, the daughter and second child of Oscar and Ella Lancaster. On April 2nd, 1934, I made my First Holy Communion, an unforgettable experience when Our Lord asked me if I would be His. He seemed to be such a handsome and wonderful Man, I agreed immediately. Then He told me to meet Him every Sunday at Holy Communion. I said nothing about this conversation to anyone, believing that everyone that went to Holy Communion heard Our Lord talk to them.

In those days I hardly knew what belonging to Our Lord meant. At last, several years later, my confessor, Fr. Lawrence Rost, whom I saw every Saturday at Holy Ghost Church two blocks up the street, asked if I ever thought

about being a religious sister. I had not of course, but he thought I could be a good sister.

I went to work on the idea right away and wrote to the superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, Maryland, for direction. Mother Mary Consuella Clifford wrote me back, told me that I was too young to enter the convent and advised that I finish high school first. I was 13 years of age and graduating that year from the eighth grade.

I had been in public school until then. My parents,

who did not want me to go to the public high school, got to work and founded St. Joseph's Catholic High School for Negroes which lasted until Archbishop Ritter put an end to segregation of Negroes in the Diocese. During my four years in high school, I sort of



put the idea of becoming a Sister on the back burner and applied myself to learning as much as I could about everything there was to learn. Unfortunately, my parents spoiled me and let me sit down much too much to books and papers when I should have been up cooking, sewing and doing household work. Underground, or along with the religious desire, was my desire to become a writer. I soon had a notebook full of rhymes, but this was not what I really wanted. I wanted to write stories, good fiction, like *Little Women*, and so on.



The day of my graduation from high school, two Oblate Sisters of Providence were present. When I walked out of the church, I went straight to them standing in the vestibule and told them that I wanted to be one of them. They were shocked, but I had done what had to be done. So that September, at age 17, I left my parents' house for Baltimore, Maryland. I knew that the novitiate was a time of trial during which the community would look me over and decide whether I had a vocation to it or not. That September day, however, when I entered the novitiate chapel for the first time, that same Lord Who spoke to me in my First Communion, welcomed me lovingly, put His arms around me and promised that from then on, I would be His. My two and a half years in the novitiate were a happy time, during which I learned from a fellow novice about "True Devotion to Mary" taught by St. Louis de Montfort. We had no book about it; Sister Alma simply reiterated emphatically that I had no true devotion to Mary because I did not belong to her as her slave. I was so moved by this that I went to the Novice Mistress, Sister Mary Inez Colthirst, and asked if I could become a slave of Mary, like Sister Alma



was. Sister Inez, amused, grabbed the chain I was wearing and said that this was the sign that all Oblates were slaves of Mary. The miraculous medal and chain were

placed around the neck of each novice when she received the habit.

On March 9th, 1944, I was allowed to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In September, I was brought to the Motherhouse and assigned to work in the pantry. Soon after New Year's, I was given a fourth-grade class whose teacher was being transferred elsewhere. So, my teaching career began, a kaleidoscope of good days and bad days that I was constantly praying to be delivered from.



I loved study and school, but not teaching. Not until August 1966 did I finally graduate from college. During the 22 years between 1944 and 1966 I had a short, happy stint at housework (mainly cleaning) at St. Rita's Residence in St. Louis and then at St. Frances Home for Girls where I learned that children had worries and broken hearts.

Improvement on the Oblates' habit that began in the fifties was completed in August 1962. I was happy about it; uniformity was desired by all the members of the community, and this was a beautiful uniformity. It lasted only five years. In January 1967 individual sisters were allowed to experiment with the headdress. I was not for this at all.

After too strictly disciplining a student who complained, I fell out of the classroom for good in February 1972. I was brought back to the Motherhouse in Baltimore. For the first time in my life, the superior general, Sister Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, asked me what I wanted to do. I immediately replied that I would like to write a history of the Order. That is how I got to work on archival material. Around this time, I became very despondent, feeling that I had failed as a teacher, that I could neither teach nor cook, and therefore why should I be alive. With my head on the desk in my cell, I was inspired with a poem honoring Our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament. When I finished writing it—and it came quite easily—I felt consoled and satisfied.

I immediately took it to Sister Benigna who was the community's topmost musician. She was not for any of the musical nonsense that was going on, and I knew that she would give my poem, "We Do Believe," quick shrift if that is what she thought it deserved. She read it, smiled,

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In Love with the Lord (cont. from pg. 7) and then said, “I am going to write music for this.” In a couple of weeks it was done, and she was teaching it at choir practice. Sister Benigna was one of the few who wore the traditional habit; I mean no hair-showing. I had unfortunately gotten into the new habit—from June 1971 until Holy Saturday 1974 I was in it—to my great regret. Our Blessed Mother helped me put the traditional habit back on when her Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima came to visit our Mount, and the Sisters went in procession to the gate to meet it. Needless to say, my return to the habit was not just for that occasion, but for the rest of my life.



I had no thought or desire of leaving my community in those days, but I was gung-ho for seeing it reformed. We had made a wrong turn, I said, and should go back. The rule of silence and monthly chapter were long gone. Sisters were invited to submit a replacement or improvement of Chapter. I wrote something and handed it in but never heard anything of it. Something else that I wrote in December 1972, “Is There Light at the End of the Tunnel?” was presented at a community meeting and caused a stir. It suggested that the Oblates recognize themselves as three-pronged, one of which would be a contemplative unit. My suggestion nettled those who wanted to see us give up the habit completely. Others who were not as far out as this nonetheless saw the contemplative life as something medieval, dangerous and unjust.

The Chapter of 1973 was an education for me. Although not an elected delegate, I was appointed an extra secretary, and I witnessed all that happened without being able to open my mouth. All Oblates had been allowed to submit proposals to the Chapter, and I submitted mine that a contemplative unit be formed. In Chapter after Chapter, I proposed the idea. I thought I had the perfect wording in 1993, that a “traditional house be established” and this passed. It was hamstrung from the very beginning. I saw nothing ahead of me but silent perseverance in the community until I died.

Around the same time, I learned of the arrival of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter in Scranton, Pennsylvania, from Wigratzbad, Germany. I went with friends to attend Fraternity events such as the solemn dedication of St. Gregory’s Chapel in Elmhurst. The Holy Father’s *Motu Proprio* of 1988 *Ecclesia Dei* was news that I latched onto as salvific. I was determined to return to and attend the Traditional Latin Mass as much as possible. When a friend of mine, John Ambs, suggested that I join the two Sisters in Scranton and form with them a traditional house there, I did not hesitate. It was Mr. Ambs who collected funds for my entry into the aegis of the Fraternity and presented it, along with my arrival May 27, 1995, to Fr. Arnaud Devillers, fssp. I came bag and baggage that day; most of the books and papers I have since destroyed or returned to the Oblate Sisters of Providence since my break from them June 11th, 1998.

Sixty years after my first vows to God on March 9th, 1944, I renewed my vows in the Benedictine manner, signing the same document that I had signed in 1998 and which the Bish-



op signed on September 14, 2004. It would seem I did a very foolish thing. After fifty years as an Oblate Sister of Providence, I started religious life anew as the foundress of a new community affiliated with the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. To those who say that my leaving my old community to found a new one didn’t make sense, I reply that it is understandable only in the life of faith. When other people came, I welcomed them because I wanted to share what I had. “The disciples were perse-



vering in prayer with Mary the Mother of Jesus.” This is a perfect description of the religious sisterhood that formed. If there’s anything I would want to pass on to the community, it would be: Devotion to Our Blessed Mother, True Devotion to Our Blessed Mother.

Sister Wilhelmina died during the Vigil of the Ascension, May 29th, with her sisters praying at her side. When she was once asked: “Why did you become a religious?” her instantaneous reply was: “Because I was in love with Our Lord.” Even in her declining years, she never fell out of love with Him. Please visit BenedictinesofMary.org for more information about this wonderful life. 🕯️