

SISTER HILDEGARDIS (MARY ELIZABETH GETTIER)  
(October 30, 1895 – March 23, 1983)

Sister M. Hildegardis, (Mary Elizabeth Gettier), was the youngest of three daughters of Edward Gettier and Josephine A. (Zimmerman) Gettier. The family connections with Morris, Illinois were strong and long lasting. Her father was known as an expert in the tobacco trade. Her mother and two aunts operated a restaurant in town until they were no longer physically able to keep up with the work entailed with the restaurant. Her sister, Mrs. Alma Fischer, was the owner of a millinery store there. Her niece, Mary Jo Barry, attended Saint Mary-of-the-Wasatch College in Salt Lake City.

Because of the influence of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in her early education she entered the community on March 19, 1916. When she completed her canonical year in 1917, she began her teaching career at St. Joseph's School, South Bend, Indiana and at the same time pursued her B.A. at Notre Dame University with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy. She earned her Masters in Education from Columbia University, New York City in 1936. At the same time she obtained her Supervisor's Certificate.

In 1939 she was assigned as the founding principal of Holy Cross School, South Bend, where she remained for seven years as principal and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. During this period Sister Georgia (Costin), CSC, and a few other academically advanced 6<sup>th</sup> graders spent the year in class with Sister Hildegardis' 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

That experience was not only challenging but also broadening as a female student. One assignment that made an impression on Sister Georgia was when the class memorized the names of FDR's cabinet. One of the members was Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor and first woman to be appointed to a Cabinet post. Sister Hildegardis used that current event to point out that women were just as capable as men to hold such a high advisory position.

Following Sister's principalship at Holy Cross School, she was appointed the Supervisor of Schools for the Midwest Province. It is evident from the 1938 minutes of the Education Committee of the Midwest Province that Sister Hildegardis became aware that some of the teachers felt ill-prepared for teaching. The Education Committee's recommendations for that year stated that Sister Hildegardis planned to respond to the sisters' request for help upgrading their academic background. Typical of Sister, she prepared a plan to provide academic help requested and followed through with it.

Sister's report to the committee the following year contains statistics of the sisters' degrees from PhD to those who hadn't yet received their high school diplomas. This broad spectrum of educational background shows there was reason for concern about some of the teachers' preparation. The reports from the supervisor, the superiors and the principals to the Education Committee concurred that there was a problem.

When Sister Hildegardis moved west she found the same need for improved teacher preparation. As she began her years as the Western Supervisor of Schools, she implemented a program aimed at providing training for the young sisters before they stepped into a classroom. This program

continued during her fifteen years as Supervisor and beyond since Sister Leonella (Moe) followed her as the next school supervisor and she, too, believed that the "Hildegardis Method" worked and Sister's research and dissertation, "Teaching Composition in the Seventh Grade," verified that belief.

Historically, the second year novices returning to the West for their first teaching experience, traveled from Saint Mary's by train and those trips were planned to allow for a stopover at the Western Provincial House in Ogden, Utah. This time they spent under the direction of Sister Hildegardis was invaluable because she was a perfect role model, "She loved to teach; she knew how to teach. This love and this ability she gave the young sisters. She taught them how to teach."<sup>1</sup> Many of those who benefited from the time in Ogden confirmed how important it was to receive such training at the beginning of their teaching careers.

Once that initial orientation was over, the young sisters were not abandoned, but entered into a second phase of training, which began when they reached their new mission. Each one was assigned an experienced teacher to mentor them throughout the school year. This sister gave them on-site assistance during weekly meetings including reviewing lesson plans and discussing practical matters related to the classroom.

A number of Sisters, who received training under Sister Hildegardis, responded to a request for stories about the influence she had on their teaching. The following are a few excerpts from the many responses received:

Sister Doreen Vignassa remembered her own elementary school days when replying:

"As a student, I had the advantage of being taught the "Hildegardis Way," so this was to my benefit when I was sent on mission with very little formal teacher training... My favorite will always be the phonics charts that gave our students a marvelous reading edge."<sup>2</sup>

Sister Patricia Hogan spoke about her good fortune to be teaching the second grade at St. Joseph's School, Ogden, and living at the Provincial House with Sister Hildegardis. She remembers meeting with Sister many evenings after recreation to go over lesson plans and often made charts working until 11:00 p.m. at night. (Those who know Sister Patricia Hogan would be surprised that she would be awake at that hour!) However, Sister Patricia's evaluation of that experience was that she was very well prepared but very tired by the end of the week. She goes on to acknowledge that she continued to use Sister Hildegardis' methods and techniques throughout her successful teaching career.

Quoting Sister Madeline Therese (Wilhoit):

"She instilled in me the confidence that I could learn to be a good teacher and she tirelessly worked with me on every aspect of teaching. ... she demanded excellence in whatever I did as a teacher. ...I am most grateful to her for my teaching skills. All

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<sup>1</sup> Gettier, Sister M. Hildegardis, [Personal File]

<sup>2</sup> Gettier, Sister M. Hildegardis, File Box II, (Box 14.5)

through my ministry life, I have been able to use those skills not only in high school, but also as Principal in our grade school in Brazil, and throughout my fourteen years of working with teachers in government schools and the formation training of Catechists in Ghana.<sup>3</sup>

Sister Margaret Ann Shield, too, used Sister's methods her whole life. About her many years in Bangladesh she says,

"I worked with the primary school (level) and Literacy schools all my life (to make sure) that children would know how to sign their names so they would demand respect from others and also be able to do fundamental arithmetic so no one could cheat them and (they would be able to) read signs so they would know where they were."<sup>4</sup>

Sister went a step further by translating the arithmetic syllabus into Bangla, the native language. The manipulatives, so much a part of Sister Hildegardis' arithmetic program, were changed to items found locally such as fruits and jute sticks. In preparing the number-concept flash cards Sister used pictures cut from children's books of Bangladesh. She also successfully taught Sister Hildegardis' method to all the primary teachers in the Dhaka Diocese.

Sister Margaret Ann Nowacki reminisced:

"I remember Sister Hildegardis as a dynamic, funny and demanding educator who was filled with innovative ideas for successful teaching. However, nothing she proposed was ever easy. It almost always involved hours of preparation, such as finding appropriate pictures for the religion charts or cutting page after page of individual math flash cards, or making yards and yards of adding machine paper with the various math bases or even sewing pockets for bean shooters to use in teaching the math concepts of ones, tens, hundreds, etc. All of these things were to help us in our methods of teaching and they were the backbone of an innovative and hands-on approach to learning that was her hallmark."<sup>5</sup>

Successful teaching was a two-pronged program. It was achieved through the mentoring system and through a written curriculum with suggestions of supplementary materials for the teachers to use. The most famous of those supplementary materials were the charts that each teacher produced for the different subjects. The importance placed on these homemade teaching aids is shown by the fact that each sister had a special chart case that was shipped from mission to mission with her trunk.

All respondents agreed that Sister Hildegardis was not only an excellent educator but also a woman ahead of her time. She loved and understood children and more importantly how their minds worked. Sister Hildegardis had every confidence in the teachers' abilities and pushed them to work at and enjoy learning so in turn they could inspire their students to be life-learners.

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<sup>3</sup>Gettier, Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Gettier, Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Gettier, Ibid.

For the 15 years she was the School Supervisor in the West, Sister Hildegardis enthusiastically and lovingly carried out her responsibilities. She visited every Holy Cross school at least once a year and sometimes more often. Her focus for those visits was to assist the teachers in any way she could. It was a time spent refining or reinforcing the teachers' skills. Sister Joseph Cecile's insight was:

"There was no one who could not advance in becoming a master teacher if she willingly accepted and learned from the critiques and methods Sister Hildegardis so generously offered. If Sister scolded, she would always be there after school to assist in remedying the problem. You had to be a willing learner to become a professional teacher!"<sup>6</sup>

Sister Jane Chantal (Method) tells of the time she was assigned as a teacher in a new inner city school. She called Sister Hildegardis to say that the opening day of school would be delayed because the staff couldn't accomplish all that needed to be done in order to be ready on time. The next day Sister Hildegardis arrived in person, apron in hand, and she worked side-by-side with the sisters to finish the preparation of the school. It was a monumental task but school opened on time—including decorated classrooms, charts, test results, desks, books, and lesson plans.

Another apparent "Mission Impossible" tale was:

"The direction I received from Sister Hildegardis when the second grade students [I was to teach] were really on first grade level. [I] was to teach first grade level for the first semester and second grade level the second semester, but that they had to be at third grade level by the end of the school year--and they were. She visited my classroom often and helped the students to achieve that goal. Failure was not part of her vocabulary."<sup>7</sup>

Sister Hildegardis sought to have the best instruction for the students and especially when it came to the teaching of religion. In the early days, the Baltimore Catechism was the basic text used for religious instruction, however, she insisted that students understand concepts and not just memorize questions and answers. She supplemented the catechism with a religion syllabus.

"The 'Happiness Unit' began the school year at each grade level. The question was asked, 'Why seeking pleasure, fame and wealth wouldn't bring real happiness. On each level the answer was [that] their anticipation was greater than their realization. (Pleasure, fame and wealth do not last) or is too much, or too little. The real source of our happiness is our life in Christ, in his incarnation, suffering and resurrection.

An added comment and tribute to Sister was that Sister Hildegardis believed this and lived it."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gettier, Sister M. Hildegardis, File Box II, (Box 14.5)

<sup>7</sup> Gettier, Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gettier, Ibid.

The content used in the subjects of religion, mathematics, and language arts was designed so students progressed from one step to the next. Arithmetic, reading and spelling tests were given regularly and students were grouped according to their level of mastery. The test results were graphed on a student's chart so the growth of the individual student and the class as a whole could be evaluated.

Sister Patricia Ann Thompson tells a humorous story about the time she was teaching third grade. A child was sitting on a small chair beside Sister Hildegardis as she checked off the 220 Basal Word list. At one point he stopped, looked up at her and said, "Am I reading too fast for you?"<sup>9</sup>

A heartwarming account comes from Sister Mary Louise Deroin. She was on the faculty of Saint Matthew's School, San Mateo when Sister Hildegardis was the principal.

...I had a First Grader who was exceptionally intelligent and who could read anything I gave him to read. So I asked Sister [Hildegardis] what to do with him. She advised me to take him to the library and let him pick out books he wanted to read. That was great. He chose, "The Biography of John F. Kennedy." [Then] before Thanksgiving I took him to the library to choose a psalm to read for a prayer service. He told me David wrote 150 psalms and that he chose Psalm 135, to read to the whole student body. I took him to Sr. Hildegardis to get her permission, and she sat him on her lap and had him read it to her. She was so delighted.<sup>10</sup>

Sister Margaret Ann Nowacki explained that:

"Once Sister Hildegardis set up a program she fully expected everyone to follow it, whether it be the religion cards to check off the prayers the students knew, or the monthly Ayers spelling test for placement, or the check list of 220 basal words for first and second graders, or passing the math charts and casting out of nines with speed, all this accountability demanded teacher time in preparation. We were programmed to succeed as teachers and I think we did, thanks to her zeal, perseverance and creativity.

One summer Sister Hildegardis brought about 15 of us (young sisters then) to San Mateo to 'get us in shape' to be the best junior high school teachers possible and to prepare us to be principals. She worked us very hard and we had class every day from eight in the morning to sometimes eight at night and then spent the rest of the time making the hands-on manipulatives that we would use in the classroom demonstrations. Many evenings we worked until almost midnight but Sister was right there working with us side-by-side, she never shirked work! As I think back on it now, almost all of the sisters who were in that very intense program did become successful in both teaching and administration.<sup>11</sup>

Sister was known in community as someone who enjoyed life and liked to plan parties. At the end of these intensive classes she created a "Christmas in July" party for summertime fun for the

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<sup>9</sup> Gettier, Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Gettier, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gettier, Ibid.



sisters who had completed the workshop. Nothing would do but to unpack all the house Christmas decorations, purchase "Christmas" gifts and serve a special "Christmas" dinner...a great time was had by all!

She spared nothing to create an atmosphere of a love of learning and taught the methods needed to impart those learning skills.

With all that Sister Hildegardis did for Holy Cross, she still found time to be involved in outside organizations and committees. As a well-respected educational leader, Sister Hildegardis was associated for many years with one of the best-known, professional Catholic groups-- the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). Her involvement with it was multi-faceted; she participated in national and regional meetings of the NCEA as well as some of its committees.

When Sister was no longer the Supervisors of Schools, it is not surprising she returned to the school setting. Her first assignment in 1958 was as a teacher at St. Mary-of-the-Wasatch College for the academic year and for the summer session. The following year she was the superior and principal of St. Mary's Academy, Salt Lake City, and taught art, English and mathematics plus led the school through the accreditation process.

The next year she was the Superior, President of the College and a member of the education faculty. It was during that second year, on April 23, 1959, the announcement was made that the college would be closing. Since a number of sisters were summer school students working to obtain their college degrees and teaching credentials, Sister Hildegardis pursued finding a way to assist them to complete those programs.

Her first appeal in November 1960 was made to the Executive Coordinator of the Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Schools Committee asking for a summer program of studies on a college level at Saint Mary-of-the-Wasatch. Her request was turned down because the committee thought it could set a precedent. She then approached the President of the University of Portland to ask for Summer Extension Courses to be held at the Wasatch campus.

In response to sister's request, Reverend Lloyd Teske, C.S.C., Dean of the Liberal Arts College, was sent to negotiate with Sister Hildegardis and the Registrar. She received an affirmative response from Father Teske, who had consulted with Fathers Kenna, Waldschmidt, and others of the University staff. An extension school could be established which would enable the teachers to obtain certification requirements in the Western States of Utah, Washington, Idaho, California and Nevada, where the sisters were teaching. Such a plan necessitated more courses to be taken by the Sister students, but the ultimate gain made the procedure feasible.

On May 11, final arrangements for the summer Extension School were completed and approved. The contract was signed by Father Kenna and Mother Virginia Marie (McHugh), Western Provincial.

Father Teske himself arrived on June 25, to be present for the opening of the summer session and remained on campus until June 29th, to enable each Sister to have her program officially

approved by the University of Portland. She continued to be an excellent educator in the west until her return to Saint Mary's.

When the public school district leased the Campus School building at Saint Mary's two rooms were excluded from the lease. One room was used to teach kindergarten and the other was used to teach religion to the Catholic public school students. Even in her last thirteen years that were spent at Saint Mary's, she saw the opportunity to set up and supervise a religion class for handicapped students using the room designated for religious education the former Campus School.

Sister's final ministry of prayer lasted eight years--from March 1975 until her death in March 1983. Just as she fulfilled so many ministries wholeheartedly throughout her life, this important ministry would be no exception.

At the time of her death laudatory testimonies were sent to Saint Mary's Convent demonstrating that over her lifetime her influence spread far and wide. Sister Hildegardis' legacy is that there were many dedicated and excellent Holy Cross sisters trained by her, and who in turn trained other teachers. It goes without saying that the multitude of students who passed through the hands of these well-trained teachers benefited from all the values and knowledge they received. One realizes that her professional life enriched many educators across the United States, in South America, in Africa and in Asia.

As recently as 2007 someone inquired about the program for grouping that she remembered from her school days in Idaho Falls in the 1950's. This most recent inquiry was one of the reasons for this paper which has incorporated some of the stories shared about her from the women she trained. Their responses confirmed the value of Sister Hildegardis and her teaching methods. What a gift and what a legacy she gave to Holy Cross educators and students.

All the responses received from the sisters can be found in the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. They give a fuller picture of Sister Hildegardis from the perspective of the people she influenced so directly.

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