

A Great School Sister, Teacher and Educator

On the 125th Anniversary of the Death of Karolina Maria Theresia Gerhardinger

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On 9 May 2004 it was 125 years ago that Karolina, Maria Theresia of Jesus Gerhardinger, the founder of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and quite probably the most significant female teacher and educator of the 19th century, passed away.

Despite her beatification (1985) and the erection of her bust in the Walhalla (1998), however, she is relatively little known among the German public; in our age characterized by its flood of information, this fact simply underlines how little the historical significance of people can be measured by the degree of coverage accorded to them in the media. In truth, such a person's significance consists much more in the sustained effect that he or she has, and in the spiritual strength with which that person influences events in the world over and beyond the period of his or her own life. Indeed, this holds true to a most remarkable extent for Maria Theresia Gerhardinger.

The Relevance of her Pedagogical Principles Today

Today, we may well consider ourselves at times caught up in what seems like a jungle of different approaches to educational reform, in which we have largely lost our sense of orientation; in the church, we perhaps are grappling with the contemporary spirituality of active life, with a diaconry fed upon contemplation alone. In such situations, it is Maria Theresia Gerhardinger, namely, who, if we take her life and her work as an example, can show us ways of solving our crises, even after more than a century: not in the sense that we should simply imitate or copy her and her work, or that she might have passed down pat solutions for us to apply, but in the sense that she can encourage us to perceive the knowledge and means that we have at our disposal today to tackle the problems of our times in a courageous, creative and well-intentioned way.

Maria Theresia Gerhardinger herself never either acted on the basis of such pat solutions, nor did she develop her theories divorced from reality. Her strength lay in focusing on things, situations and challenges in an unbiased way, analysing them objectively, making decisions confidently and acting on her insights, without allowing herself to be intimidated or led astray by anyone, no matter whom.

Her Life and her Vocation

When Karolina Gerhardinger was born in Regensburg-Stadtamhof on 20 June 1797, the daughter of shipmaster Willibald Gerhardinger and his wife Franziska, the world was in turmoil. The period of her childhood, in fact the whole of her life of nearly 82 years, was accompanied by myriad political, social and religious uncertainties and transformations.

As they stood at the side of her cot, her parents could never have begun to imagine how their only child would be faced with so daunting a task one day, how significant she was to become for countless people far beyond the borders of her mother country and Europe. Indeed, Karolina herself would hardly have considered herself as being at the outset of an outstanding or auspicious career in her life when, in 1809, she consented to the suggestion by the Dean of Regensburg Cathedral at that time and later Bishop, Georg Michael Wittmann, that she be trained as a teacher in order to be able to found a new, up-to-date convent school when the time came. Very talented, and interested in a wide range of subjects, she most certainly did not see herself spending her future teaching in a tiny classroom. Yet, with the very determination that was to characterize her throughout her life, the twelve-year-old decided to plan out her life in a fashion that, even if she had thought of it herself, she would never have chosen.

We can only conjecture today on what it was that ultimately led her to take this decision; nevertheless, what we do know for certain are the consequences and fruits of that choice:

- the foundation of the very first modern, international convent school congregation, active worldwide under the independent leadership of a Mother Superior;
- the purposeful compilation of a set of pedagogical principles for an industrialized society that were not only up-to-date but also oriented far into the future;
- the provision of opportunities for girls and young women from all strata of the population to enjoy an education as the precondition for equal rights in social and political life.

Her Personality

From now on, for 70 years, Karolina stands by this decision of hers, a decision that is to demand of her unspeakable endeavors and to result in a good deal of underestimation, calumny and suffering. She remains equally determined when her first two companions desert her on the way to the founding ceremony. Nor does she give up when, in 1834, after the death of her patrons and friends Wittmann and Job, she, the unknown little teacher, destitute and deprived of influential supporters, finds herself confronted almost exclusively with incomprehension and opposition.

She remains faithful to the mission entrusted to her by Wittmann, for it is in this that she recognizes God's will. Completely on her own – and this is where her magnanimity becomes evident – she withstands all the hostility and all the lack of appreciation, and continues along her chosen path: now aged 36, she relinquishes the secure post as a teacher in the service of

the King of Bavaria and, burning all her bridges behind her, abandons her stable bourgeois career. She takes her widowed mother with her to the little convent in Neunburg vorm Wald, sells her parents' house in Stadtamhof and puts her entire fortune without reservation into serving "God's cause", to which she now knows she is committed.

Undaunted, astute and purposeful, she undertakes arduous journeys to this purpose, turning courageously to anyone she hopes can help her, firstly to King Ludwig II of Bavaria and his sister Caroline, Empress Caroline of Austria. Later, she is to conduct negotiations in many different countries with governments and bishops, and even with the Pope.

Throughout her whole life she does not allow anybody or anything to deter her from always doing what she considers right and in the interest of "God's cause".

In 1847, now already 50, she sets off with five sisters to North America, much to the disdain of the bishops of mostly English and Irish descent, to actively combat the sorry state of education there among the children of the German immigrants.

Shortly after her return, she is beset by what is probably to be the hardest trial of her life: in the course of the conflict over the constitution of the new religious order, the Archbishop of Munich, Graf Reisach, demands that she place the newly founded convent school completely under his jurisdiction. Maria Theresia Gerhardinger considers herself in no position to be able to contravene the explicit instructions of Wittmann, however: before he died, he commissioned her to make the religious order directly responsible to the Pope. Thereupon, the meeting takes a dramatic turn in its development when the Archbishop temporarily dismisses her from her office as Mother Superior and, in case she should not immediately submit, threatens her with excommunication. Whereas the sisters from the Motherhouse who are present at the meeting are so desperate that they burst into tears, Maria Theresia Gerhardinger kneels down before the Archbishop and, in a calm, subdued voice,

1 After their first encounter, he says of her: "This lady knows what she wants, and what she wants is eminent and noble."

says: "I shall submit to your Grace's jurisdiction, provided that this does not contradict the will of God or my conscience."² Which woman could ever have acted more courageously, more astutely, more determinedly or more spiritually, especially in the 19th century?

"God's Cause"

If we want to understand her pedagogical principles properly, to grasp in the appropriate way just how effective her actions were, we have to conceptualize this clarity, this strength of character, in short, her confidence, which in turn was based on her unshakeable belief.

Karolina Maria Theresia Gerhardinger is not only a most accomplished teacher and educator herself; she is also able to pass on her enthusiasm for the teaching profession to others, and to train them proficiently.

In 1853, twenty years after the establishment of the first convent in Neunburg, there are as many as 346 sisters teaching approximately 17,000 pupils in the 70 institutions of the Congregation, not only in various German states, but also in Bohemia, Austria and North America. When Maria Theresia Gerhardinger dies in 1879, there are more than 3,000 sisters, and the number of children and youngsters being looked after in schools and homes is to exceed 80,000.

Mother Theresia, as her sisters have been calling her since the beginnings of the Congregation, thinks very little of instructions or orders in education, and nothing at all of pressure or force; instead, she prefers patient, empathetic affection and conviction. She instils such conviction in others as to what is of paramount importance in the life of a human being through her words, her deeds and her life itself. Endowed with a keen, analytical intellect, far above-average musical and _____

2 Immediately after the occurrence, she sends Sister Maria Margarita Wiedemann, who is later to succeed her as Mother Superior, to Rome to secure permission for the Congregation's regulations at the Holy See.

creative abilities, and being generous and open-hearted, she recognizes the problems of her times and the misery of the people. To combat this, she does not develop economic and social theories like her contemporaries Marx and Engels, but works incessantly at using all the possibilities and means at her disposal to overcome the poverty and distress in her environment directly.

- Hence, she founds homes for the many orphans whose parents have become victims of the Industrial Revolution.
- She ensures that in her schools the children receive at least a bowl of hot soup at lunchtime.
- For girls who have left school she sets up so-called "schools for industry" (the forerunners of today's vocational schools) to specifically prepare them for making a living independently.
- She alleviates the concern of working parents for their children by founding a number of nursery schools and day-care centers.
- Realizing that the only way for women to become independent and free is through education, she establishes high schools for girls from all strata of society in which, in addition to gaining a deeper knowledge of elementary subjects, pupils are also taught several modern languages, music and various forms of creative art, as well as "physical education" (something that at that time was virtually a revolution).

As early as 1839, only six years after the founding of the Congregation, she opens the High School for Girls in Amberg, the first institution of its kind - distrusted by many, and in the face of opposition from within the convent and from several inhabitants of Amberg.

Everything that Maria Theresia Gerhardinger tackles is executed competently, comprehensively and thoroughly. To enable her sisters to work well and efficiently, she ensures that they receive comprehensive, well-qualified training. Hence, in Munich she founds the first teacher training institution for female teachers in Bavaria, sets up seminaries for training needlework teachers and nursery school staff, and in the Motherhouse in Munich runs her own publishing and printing center which provides the curricula and textbooks that are necessary.

Mother Theresia's pedagogical ingenuity is especially manifested in the way in which she recognizes and promotes gifted youngsters, how she leads her sisters so that they can work independently, motivating them by the trust she places in them to give their best, and how, following the Biblical parable, she cultivates the talents of her sisters to bring them to fruition for the benefit of the pupils' education.

It is from her absolute lack of selfishness, the essential feature of her character and the one that sets her apart from others, that she derives her great personal confidence and her unusual strength, which in turn enables her to make distinctions and reach decisions.

Before she takes a decision, she never wonders about the possible consequences for herself. When executing a plan, she never has her eye on success or appreciation, nor does she shun conflict, incomprehension or rejection; instead, she focuses her attention on "God's cause" alone, the mission she has set out to accomplish. Thus, she is always absolutely free and independent of all possible (also "pious") prejudices or ideological tensions. In the same way, her point of view is clear and unerring at all times, enabling her to perceive the core of a problem immediately.

Only her freedom, stemming from her selflessness, can explain the remarkable, unswerving ability she possesses to master a situation, amidst the diverse cases of resistance, underestimation and misinterpretation of her actions, amidst all the threats and hostility; it is this ability that enables her to remain constantly faithful to her inner insights and to the decision her conscience has had her take.

Her Educational Concept

Let us remember this great teacher and educator who, with her concept of the holistic training of young women to become independent, mature and responsible members of society, was way ahead of her time; hence, together with her sisters, she paved the way for the modern education of women. Let us remember that it was this great school sister who established institutions of which the significance for educational and social history in the 19th and 20th

centuries we have not been able to appreciate in full until today. These memories, indeed, prompt us to pose the following question:

How would Maria Theresia Gerhardinger have judged the school reforms being initiated at present?

This question can be answered relatively quickly and clearly when we consider the motive behind her actions and the objectives underpinning the outline of her educational and training concept:

- For Maria Theresia Gerhardinger the young person alone is the focus of all pedagogical efforts, that is, both as a creature and an image of God. A school for her is a room in which there is life, where education and training, inseparably intertwined with one another, serve solely to promote the holistic development of the young person towards independence, personal freedom and responsibility.

For this reason, being vigilant, she would recognize and resolutely reject any attempt to exploit a person for a particular purpose or to instrumentalize a school for vested ideological or economic interests.

- Maria Theresia Gerhardinger's educational concept was not developed in a purely theoretical way, divorced from reality, but within the classroom context itself, and not only in her own lessons but also in those held by her sisters. She did not pass down her concept in the form of instructions from above, but conceived it together with others, assumed responsibility for it together with others, and constantly worked at reforming it, i.e. improving it.

Her pedagogical principles were designed to serve the lives of people, which is why she makes paying direct attention to pupils and showing them affection the preconditions she deems absolutely necessary. However, lest the pedagogical work be left to chance, lest it be destroyed by the vested interests of the teachers or by arbitrariness, Maria Theresia Gerhardinger insists on having something much more important than theories, instructions and orders: she insists that teaching be governed by a very high degree of pedagogical ethos, which she sees based in the responsibility of the educator to God.

- Mother Theresia Gerhardinger never takes time to systematically present her educational and training concept in such a way that it can be passed on in written form to future generations. What is far more effective, sustainable in the truest sense of the word, is how she transmits that concept to her sisters as a living entity. She does not commit her teachers to binding teaching guidelines or to a ready-formulated educational methodology; instead, she teaches the sisters that the efforts they invest in their teaching and educational work can only be successful, can only come to fruition, if they first “win over the hearts of the children”. In so doing, she clearly underlines how, in the whole process of education and training, the human-based principle is the only one, the inalienably valid one.

For this reason, nowhere near so important a role should be accorded to either economic, socio-political or ideological interests.

“Winning over their hearts”

This short, yet undoubtedly sophisticated slogan aims at the essential; at the same time, it is the formula for an educational concept that has in the meantime been valid and withstood the test of time for a period of more than 150 years. Were this formula to be taken as the decisive *leitmotif* for school reform nowadays, not only could superfluous arguments be avoided, but also fatal and misguided adventures. It would form the basis, not only for objectives to be set in cooperation with others, but also for the realization that those who represent educational policy, as well as those in the bureaucratic system of a ministry who handle its teachers, must proceed according to the very same principle if a sustained reform of the school system is both to be set in motion and enabled to maintain that motion of its own accord.

Would it not be the case that school reforms conducted in keeping with this very same guiding principle would be ideally suited to establishing a school that is at one and the same time a friendly environment in which to learn and teach, and an environment that is worthy of the people who are actively involved in it?

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