

Mother Praxedes Carty: Serving God by Serving Others

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In El Paso, one of the most recognized private educational institutions is Loretto Academy. Located in the peaceful area known as Austin Terrace, Loretto overlooks El Paso and her sister city, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The Academy was established by the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross who celebrated their bicentennial in 2012. The school was the last project of an Irish nun who had led the Loretines as Superior General for more than a quarter of a century and had come back to her beloved Southwest to spend her last years: Mother Praxedes Carty.

Mother Praxedes was born Susan Carty in Bawnboy, Ireland, on March 4, 1854. According to the book *Only One Heart: The Story of a Pioneer Nun in America*, by Sister Patricia Jean Manion, Susan's father, Mark, was the village miller, while her mother, Ellen, was busy taking care of the family home and Susan's ten brothers and sisters. The Carty Family were devoted Catholics, and for Susan, this love for God was deeply instilled in her heart. The family would kneel together to say the rosary, laugh and joke at dinnertime and tell Irish folk stories at night.

Although Susan wasn't considered the prettiest of the Carty girls, her father always remarked that she "had a heart of gold." At a very young age, Susan served as a guide to Moira, the local blind beggar woman, because, according to the local priest, to serve God was to serve others.

Facing a struggling economy and religious persecution from Protestants for being Catholic, the Carty Family decided to immigrate to America. Susan's first thought was about Moira and how she would get along without her. The young Susan even had a fleeting thought that she should stay behind in Ireland so Moira wouldn't get lost along the road.

In June 1865, the Carty Family left Ireland for a new life in St. Louis, Mo. Their father worked hard as a miller in one of the factories, while their mother toiled to try to make their house on O'Fallon Street a home.

At the beginning of the summer of 1866, Susan was first introduced to the Sisters of Loretto. At the age of 12, Susan and her sister, Maria, along with her sister's new husband, David, traveled by riverboat to Cape Girardeau, Mo. Upon arrival, they were greeted at the river by Mother Bridget and David's sister, Sister Cecilia. Susan was fascinated by the black habits of the nuns, especially the two little red hearts that were embroidered on their capes. When Susan asked what the hearts stood for, Sister Cecilia explained that they represented the hearts of Mother Mary and Jesus.

Mother Bridget and Sister Cecilia escorted Susan to St. Vincent's Academy, a boarding school run by the Sisters of Loretto. The school sat tall and proud upon a grassy hill, with a small chapel and children playing out by the orchard. She even found that the school had its own art studio, but it was the nuns and the pretty embroidered hearts on their habits with which Susan fell in love. After returning home, Susan gained a promise from her father that come the start of the next school year, she would be attending school with the Sisters of Loretto.

In August 1866, Susan's parents decided to return to Ireland because Ellen was homesick and very depressed. Only taking their youngest child with them, they left their other children in care of their oldest daughter, Maria. Because of the expense to go back to Ireland, Susan's father explained she would not be able to attend St. Vincent's Academy after all. She was heartbroken.

That September, Susan began school at St. Philomena's, run by the Sisters of Charity, and while



Susan Carty became Mother Praxedes Carty and served as Superior General of the Loretto Order for 26 years.

(Photo courtesy of El Paso County Historical Society)

there were girls playing about in the yard and a little church and nuns, there were no little red hearts on their habits. For Susan, it just wasn't the same. She dreadfully missed Mother Bridget and Sister Cecilia, as well as her parents.

In 1868, Maria fell sick and died, either from typhoid fever or pneumonia, or both — a doctor could not determine — and Susan began caring for Maria's three sons. News of their eldest daughter's death reached Mark and Ellen in Ireland, and they quickly made plans to return to America. In the spring of 1869, the family was reunited.

By this time, Susan was 15, and like most young ladies her age, she took great care and pride in her appearance, curling her hair and adorning it with ribbons while making sure her dress and shoes were always perfect. She also found herself the subject of teasing from her family for being so vain.

Although Susan still regularly prayed on her knees with her rosary and attended Catholic services, she had no intention of becoming a nun. She decided to apply for her first job at Hilliker's Dry Goods Store as a salesgirl, much to her family's protest. According to Sister Jean's book, her father agreed to allow her to work as long as "the gold in her pocket didn't steal the gold away from her heart."

On Nov. 1, 1869, the Carty patriarch died from heart trouble. Six short months later, his wife Ellen joined him. On her death bed, Ellen made Susan promise that she would weigh her responsibilities to her family well. Susan continued to work and raise the children left by her sister, Maria. But all the while, in her heart and mind, Susan began to think about her life's purpose and how she could best serve God.

In 1873, Susan began to think about life in the convent. She recalled her younger years and how much she had admired the Sisters of Loretto. Susan spoke about wanting to become a nun with her sister Kitty, who quickly laughed. According to Sister Jean's book, Kitty thought that Susan was too vain and concerned about having a good time to live a holy life. Susan's brother, John, however, suggested she seek out Father McCaffery, the family priest, to ask his advice.

After mass one Sunday, Susan approached the family priest. Father McCaffery suggested that she think long and hard before making such an important decision, that life as a nun was not one of leisure. There would be many rules that she might not agree with that must be followed. There would be no husband and no children of her own. He also told Susan that she would no longer be the darling of the family and asked her if she could handle taking a backseat to others.

Over the years, Susan had been given more responsibility at the store: she now kept the books in addition to waiting on customers. Moreover, the store owner's son made it clear that he wanted her to be his wife. But Susan's thought of wanting to become a nun would not leave her. She was sure of one thing: "The only way to serve God is to serve others." But who were the "others"?

In 1874, Susan traveled to Kentucky and the Motherhouse for the Sisters of Loretto to take her vows as a novice. First, however, Susan had to come up with her new Christian name. Sitting before the mistress of the novices, Susan went through a list of names that she preferred: Wilfrid, Henrietta, Mary Henry, Decarose. All were rejected by Mother Dafrosa who suggested rather firmly that Susan take the name of a Roman martyr who died for her beliefs. Susan was now to be known, much to her dislike, as Sister Praxedes.

On July 16, 1874, dressed in the blue habit and white veil of a novice, Sister Praxedes spoke her first vows dedicating her life to Christ and to the service of others.

It didn't take long for Sister Praxedes to learn that the life of a novice was indeed very difficult. There were prayer times to be observed, floors to be swept, meals to be prepared, pots to be scrubbed, clothes to be washed and mended and gardens to be tended, all dictated by the chiming of the church bells. Of course, there was also homesickness to overcome, but it was the sickness in Sister Praxedes' body that would change her life, as well as the future of the desert Southwest, forever.

Shortly after joining the order of the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, Sister Praxedes fell ill. Even with bed rest and medicine, she just did not get better. Sister Praxedes had tuberculosis. The doctor's recommendation was for her to move west, since it was thought in the late 1800s and early 1900s that a dry, hot climate would help tuberculars.

Sister Praxedes' new assignment was in Santa Fe, N.M. According to the article "Mother Praxedes' Deeds Left Imprint on EP Area," published in the *El Paso Times* in June 1963, once in New Mexico, Sister Praxedes "became a character in one of the most historic events for New Mexico." On June 16, 1875, Bishop Salpointe presented the Sacred Pallium to Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the first Archbishop of Santa Fe.

The pallium is an ancient vestment (dating as far back as the 6th century) conferred on new archbishops consisting of a band of cloth with six black crosses worn around the neck with pendants hanging down in the front and back. The pallium is worn as a symbol of obedience to the pope by the archbishop.

New Mexico held new challenges for Sister Praxedes, the biggest being that she knew no Spanish. Not only was that the spoken language of the locals, it was also the language in which all church services were conducted. Thanks to the love and assistance of Mother Magdalen, Mother Francisca and Archbishop Lamy,

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Sister Praxedes' health and spirits soon improved. She also became fluent in Spanish. It was while still in Santa Fe that Sister Praxedes took her final vows to become a nun.

In 1878, Sister Praxedes was given a new assignment and was sent to Bernalillo, N.M. There she accepted responsibility for educating young girls, remodeling St. Vincent's Academy and planting gardens to make the order more self-sufficient and debt free. Her family background which forced each member to contribute to the well-being of others, as well as her business background gleaned from her days at Hilliker's store, served her well when it came to financial matters.

In August 1880 shortly after ordering the lumber for their new porch in Bernalillo, Sister Praxedes traveled to Santa Fe for a spiritual retreat. On Aug. 24, she was called to the office of Mother Francisca. A major scandal was brewing in Las Cruces. A priest and a novice had renounced their vows, gotten married and stayed in the area. Sister Praxedes was ordered not to return to Bernalillo but to go to the Loretto Academy of the Visitation in Las Cruces, a school which had been founded in 1879. Mother Magdalen would accompany her.

Upon their arrival in Las Cruces about 2 a.m. after a grueling stage coach ride, Mother Magdalen informed Sister Praxedes that she would be known as *Mother Praxedes* from now on. It would be her responsibility to finish the half-built academy that was \$5,000 in debt as well as to restore the Order's damaged reputation.

The new Mother Superior quickly realized that most residents of Las Cruces were poor, but "through bazaars, fairs, sales, charging tuition, and bank loans she quickly set about liquidating the debt," according to an exhibition on the history of the Sisters of Loretto in Las Cruces by Portia Vescio and Wendy C. Simpson, found in the Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University (NMSU) Library Archives. The written comments also indicated that parents delinquent in paying their children's tuition were forced to do so when Mother Praxedes took them to court. She was tough and she became skilled in raising money.

However, she also made the Order a part of the community by socializing with the residents and making the Academy self-sufficient. Vescio and Simpson in the above mentioned source in the NMSU archives mentioned that the Sisters of Loretto were sued by Eugene Van Patten, tax assessor for Las Cruces, because he believed that their land was being used to make a profit, when in actuality it was being cultivated as a vegetable garden for the nuns and their boarding students. It was Mother Praxedes who testified in court that the land helped feed the school's poor students.

The school grew to the point that two wings were added, one designed by noted El Paso architect, Henry C. Trost. Loretto Academy would provide education for students in the Las Cruces area until it closed in 1943.

After making improvements to the land around the convent and school, Mother Praxedes helped raise money

to restore St. Genevieve Church, originally built in the 1850s as an adobe building. It was replaced in 1886 by a brick building with twin bell towers, 44 feet high, built with money from local parishioners, including Colonel Van Patten. This church would serve Las Cruces until 1967, when it was torn down, and a new St. Genevieve's church was built on South Espina Street. According to a 1963 *El Paso Times* article, when Mother Praxedes left Las Cruces 13 years after her arrival, she was "one of the most beloved leaders that community ha[d] ever known."

In 1893, Mother Praxedes was reassigned to the Loretto Academy in Florissant, Mo. Then in 1894, she was sent to Loretto Heights Academy, an elementary

also provided the opportunity to teach God's truth, Mother Praxedes used her incredible mind for business to establish 51 Loretto Academies throughout the country, including two four-year colleges, "normal schools" for educating new teachers.

Her dreams of establishing higher education for young women became reality when she built Loretto College in Webster Groves (St. Louis), Mo., in 1916. It took the name Webster College in 1924 and was one of the first Catholic colleges for women west of the Mississippi. As all-male colleges began admitting women, Webster College began offering courses to men in 1962, and in 1967, the Catholic Church turned over ownership to a lay board of directors.

Today the college is known as Webster University, a private, non-profit, nondenominational international institution which offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in the U. S., Europe and Shanghai, China. Webster University also offers degrees to members of the military as they serve their country, including on our own Fort Bliss Campus.

Two years later in 1918 under the direction of Mother Praxedes, Loretto Heights Academy in Denver also became a women's college, according to Carolyn Dunbar,

editor of the *Loretto Magazine*. It was accredited in 1926. Although it educated thousands of young women for 70 years, financial difficulties mounted and this Loretto college was turned over to Regis University in 1988, which in turn sold it to Teikyo University Group in Japan. In 2009, the school, built at the highest point of the city, with the original building constructed of red sandstone, changed its name to Colorado Heights University.

Mother Praxedes also planned the first foreign mission of the Loretto Society — to China. Nuns worked there from 1922 to 1951, when one was martyred and the Loretines were expelled by the communists.

Throughout her years as Superior General, Mother Praxedes never lost her love for the desert Southwest. After finally retiring her position as Superior General in 1922, Mother Praxedes came to El Paso as the local superior to help plan, fund and build Loretto Academy. The great multi-tasker had to work, even in "retirement."

Despite financial hardships, the building of Loretto Academy proceeded. Rejecting the original suggestion of building Loretto in Golden Hill Terrace, close to present day "Pill Hill" in the Sierra Medical District, Mother Praxedes chose 19-1/2 acres of land far outside the city limits in an area called Austin Terrace. Rather than build one part of the school at a time, she chose to build the entire shell of the school, designed by Gustavus Adolphus Trost, brother of Henry C. Trost, who together had established a highly successful architectural firm in El Paso.

Mother Praxedes believed the school was more likely to be completed if the entire framework existed, and she proved to be correct. However, at the time, some people called it "Praxedes' Folly." After all, it was six miles from the town's center, there was no transportation to the area and education for girls was not a priority, except to Mother Praxedes.



The chapel stands between the two "wings" of the former convent and the academy of El Paso's Loretto Academy (Photo by Isabel Hernandez)

and secondary school for girls, in Denver, Colo., established in 1890. According to an article published in the *Southwest Catholic Register* dated February 1962, it was Mother Praxedes' "strong hand" that saved the academy from "being lost to the society, as a result of the financial panic sweeping the country in 1894." She was determined that girls in the West would not be denied a Catholic education. The strong Irish girl had become a force to be reckoned with even in the boardrooms of big financial institutions.

In 1896, Mother Praxedes was called back to the Motherhouse in Kentucky to fill the remaining two years of a four-year term of Mother Catherine, Superior General of the Loretto Society, who had been asked to resign, along with the Ecclesiastical General, Father Gambon, in a serious dispute over authority. Mother Praxedes was charged to unite the two factions in the Loretto Order, and through much hard work did so, being subsequently elected by the sisters to two full six-year terms, the maximum number of terms allowed for such a position.

So successful and beloved was Mother Praxedes in this position of leadership that she was elected to two more six-year terms, after the sisters asked and were granted papal permission to do so. Mother Praxedes thus served as Superior General of the entire Loretto Order for an unprecedented 26 years.

Mother Praxedes worked tirelessly for her Order. She traveled to Rome three times to petition Pope Pius X for approval of the constitution and rules of the Order, which had existed almost a century with only temporary approval, with a final Decree of Confirmation granted in 1907. During the influenza epidemic, she sent the Sisters of Loretto into some of the worst hit areas to provide nurses for the sick.

Believing it was the Order's duty to educate women and the poor, and that the buildings in which to do so

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