

St. Scholastica's College: Her First Sixty Years

● Sister M. Soledad, O.S.B.

"My dear Sisters, I see in spirit our Sisters in big numbers spread over the Philippines, in many houses working for the salvation of immortal souls for the greater glory of God." With a vision of hope, Mother Birgitta Korff, O.S.B. (the first Prioress General of the Congregation of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzling which was then no more than a sapling though it branched from a trunk whose roots were thirteen-and-a-half centuries old) sent five of her spiritual daughters off to the Philippines, in August 1906. On the 14th of September, on the day the Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the Sisters arrived in Manila.

The entrance of the Congregation into the Philippine missionary field was answer to a request expressed in November of 1905: the Philippines had newly launched a widespread system of public, secular education; and the call for new missionaries issuing from the islands reached the Prioress General in Brazil where she was founding the Congregation's first mission in South America.* It was hardly the time to open another mission on the other side of the globe. But there was the need of the Church, of God's people. And the dream of a future *St. Scholastica's College* in Manila was Mother Birgitta's answer. *St. Scholastica's* should be part of the eternal hymn of praise and glory rising to God.

* Soon after its foundation in Germany in 1885, the Congregation sent Sisters to Africa, where there are now four priories. In later years houses were established in other countries of Europe, the United States, Korea and Japan, besides South America and the Philippines.

The first house in Tondo hardly deserved the name "school". It opened classes on the 3rd of December 1906 for eight students. When the prospect of enrolment increased to eleven students, including boarders from the South, the school was considered overcrowded, and the need for larger quarters became imperative. The vacated military barracks and stables of San Marcelino, where St. Theresa's College now stands constituted the second site. Seven years of growth alongside that of the city of Manila were spent in that place. Then, in 1914, out moved blackboards, charts, desks, everything, to the swampy, little-inhabited area of Singalong district in the outskirts of Manila. Here, the first of the pre-war buildings was built, the first home *St. Scholastica's* could really call her own.

Six years after her establishment, *St. Scholastica's* branched out to Legazpi in Albay. Shortly after World War I, daughter houses opened one after the other: In Opon, Cebu; in Bacolor and Angeles, Pampanga; in Mambajao on Camiguin Island; in Boac, Marinduque; and in Mexico, Pampanga. In the 1930's schools were founded in Ormoc, Leyte; and Candaba, Pampanga. Just a few months before the outbreak of World War II, a new foundation was begun in Sta. Cruz, Laguna, only to be razed by fire in the Liberation of 1945.

St. Scholastica's, now a priory, was for a time during the Occupation, a refuge for other homeless Religious and a sanctuary for a number of other evacuees. *St. Scholastica's*, too, was a hospital for American soldiers, and then for Japanese soldiers, with the Sisters serving as nurses and orderlies. But when the smoke and furor of the Liberation of 1945 died down, *St. Scholastica's* was one stretch of rubble: only two small, old wooden buildings remained erect, badly scarred, but still standing. Old *St. Scholastica's* was down, but Benedictine roots die hard, and soon a new *St. Scholastica's* was shooting forth from the ashes and through the broken stones.

With hardly a pause for breath after the Liberation, three other schools were erected: one in Taal, Batangas; and two on the island of Leyte — in Maasin and in Carigara. A number of the schools had been destroyed during the war, or had passed on to other hands, but other houses had been opened in their stead. And so, from 1945 to

1948, *St. Scholastica's* priory concentrated on replenishing and strengthening the staff in existing houses whose personnel had been reduced in number by the War. Then, once more, she paid heed to incessant requests for additional schools. The twin-schools, *St. Benedict's Academy* in Guinobatan, Albay and *St. Scholastica's Academy* in Bacolod City opened simultaneously in 1958. Two more *St. Scholastica's* followed: in Marikina Heights in 1961 and in Tabunok, Cebu, four years later. *Assumption College* in San Fernando, Pampanga, was started for the diocese in 1963 and turned over to diocesan administration in 1966 after establishment work was done.

The Philippines in the early twentieth century was musical even as it had been before the seven thousand islands were unified under a single name, and even as it is now, at the approach of another century. But the music in the people's song and dance and rhythm had as yet not been moulded into form, nor analyzed and enriched by contact with the music of other lands, and other times in other places. *St. Scholastica's* had in her small community of Sisters one who had been a known concertist before her convent days. Through her dedication and eventually her supervision, *St. Scholastica's* conservatory was established.

In 1907, mainly because it was as yet little known locally, it was difficult to excite interest in music education. Sister M. Baptista Battig, O.S.B., *St. Scholastica's* pianist, was presented, with ecclesiastical permission, at two concerts. This introduced her gift to the Manila public and interested society in the new branch of education the year-old school was opening. The public caught enthusiasm for the new conservatory and for formal education. Sister Baptista retired behind the stage curtains to set herself to developing Filipino musicians, a task she undertook till her death in the early part of World War II, thirty-five years later. For many years, therefore, *St. Scholastica's* Conservatory of Music gave to the Philippine world of music such leaders and artists as Lucrecia Kasilag, Estrella Wijangco-Ackermann, Leonor Laperal-Arce and Sister M. Cyril Ferroils, S.SP.S.; moreover, succeeding heads of the post-war School of Music have been students of Sister Baptista.

American democracy gave new ideals to the Filipino woman of the post-World War I era. She now saw herself intellectually developed,

able to meet a man on equal grounds in the professions, and seeking equality of rights in society and government. *St. Scholastica's* had in her classrooms young girls growing up into women with these ideals. The elementary and secondary schools were made to grow; and college courses were expanded as the Filipino woman's horizon widened: by the outbreak of World War II courses for the Scholastican college student ranged from the liberal and fine arts to commerce and preparatory law and medicine, and even to graduate studies in music and education.

The years after World War II saw colleges and universities mushrooming in almost every city of the Philippines. It also saw the Filipino woman not only equipped, and further equipping herself with the benefits of higher education, but also drawn out of the home by careers and professions in what used to be man's world exclusively. The young Filipina now more than ever needed orientation and an understanding of her fundamental role; moreover, she needed to find a way by which she might successfully harmonize the dual function modern life was certain to require of her. The Filipina studying to be a teacher, a counselor, chemist, musician or business executive would not be just any of those professionals for long. *St. Scholastica's* knew that most of her students would, some years after college, be a *wife-and-mother* and teacher, a *wife-and-mother* and pianist, etc. The *wife-and-mother* part would almost invariably be there; and every Scholastican had to be prepared for so lofty a dignity as an individual, and so vital a responsibility to the Church and to her country. *St. Scholastica's* dropped many of her pre-war college courses and concentrated on a few with the special objective of preparing the woman for her role in society, in the changing society.

In September of 1957 *St. Scholastica's College* was accredited by the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities, the first accrediting body in the Philippines. At the same time *St. Scholastica's* became a charter member of the association. Re-accreditation was earned in 1960, and again in 1967. In 1965 *St. Scholastica's* high school department was one of the two high schools that sought and gained accreditation from the same association. Thirty-two years earlier the Board of Educational Survey, confirming the report of the Educational Survey Commission of 1925, named two schools as repre-

sentatives of those maintaining "the highest standards with reference to physical plant, equipment, teaching personnel, and methods of instruction." (*A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands by the Board of Educational Survey, Manila, Bureau of Printing, 1925, p. 93*). *St. Scholastica's College* was one of the two. Excellence as a criterion in her educational work was given to *St. Scholastica's* by her superiors as far back as her start. She has subscribed to excellence — or more correctly, striven after excellence — not for excellence's sake, but because excellence is part of her idea of service to God and the Filipino people in educating the youth. Her first directress, Sister M. Willibalda Schrader, O.S.B., gave the tone to the school when she headed it in 1908; she kept the pitch through the succeeding thirty years of her service as school-head till 1938; and passed on the heritage to her successors. Doing anything to one's utmost and one's best is but trading wisely with one's talents and living for the greater glory of God.

The past sixty years of *St. Scholastica's College* have been characterized by decisions which were a response to the needs of the moment rather than by projects resulting from long-range planning. Her pioneering in the field of music in the Philippines, the adjustments in her college curriculum to fulfill the ever-changing needs of the Filipino woman — these speak of her desire to strive after excellence in educating the Filipino woman. The pace of her progress has been irregular in her striving for ideals; she has achieved a harmony that is not dissonant with the eternal "music of the spheres," in her efforts to strike a balance between woman's unchanging role as wife and mother and her other role in the career and professional world.

St. Scholastica's has always had the poor and the sick and the ignorant with her. When she first flung her schooldoors open in 1906 to eight tuition-paying students, she at the same time opened a free school in an adjoining garage for fifty boys and girls. The school, which taught and continues to teach old and young alike, has ever been with *St. Scholastica's College*, at times sharing rooms with the college during those hours when the collegiates were not using the rooms. In 1921, the Free School was formally established, given its own quarters in a section of the college compound, and granted government recognition.

Six hundred boys and girls fill up its rooms every year. The expansion to a free high school is a cherished dream at the moment.

Little known and even less publicized is the extension work undertaken by *St. Scholastica's* to bring the Word of God to the masses. In the early years, Sundays found hardly a Sister left at home in the convent. Mission work in parishes, in barrio catechetical centers, along seashores and hills, in reformatories, in prisons and hospitals, brought the Sisters out weekends. In extension work, Manila's community of Benedictine Sisters ranged from Morong, Pateros, and similar places along the Pasig and out across the Bay to Corregidor. Summer time was "mission time" both in Manila and the provinces for Sisters engaged in the regular schools during the academic year. In 1920, *St. Scholastica's* invited her students to help the Sisters reach out to these underprivileged. This sharing in apostolic work has gone on ever since; today close to five hundred college students of the Manila college engage in it.

The care for the indigent sick in Manila has been an almost natural outgrowth of the Free School. From the very start, an ambulant dispensary tended to the families of the Free School students as well as to other poor families in the neighborhood. But in 1952, St. Stephen's Patronage, occupying a part of the Free School area, extended its medical services to the poor more widely and more professionally, with the volunteer services of two doctors. Today it has about a thousand families on its regular list. Every house of the priory carries on similar dispensary work. In 1965 the Philippine priory took on another medium for bringing God to man: it engaged in hospital work for the first time in the Philippines when it undertook the administration of St. Paul's in Tacloban City.

Up until World War II, the great majority of the Sisters working at *St. Scholastica's College* and the Philippine priory had come from the Mother-house in Germany. Since 1945, however, the Philippine novitiate has grown and has been the main source of additional personnel for the Philippine houses. In 1958, the Philippines went a step further and started to send out Filipino Sisters to mission abroad.

As *St. Scholastica's* cast a backward look through her first sixty years, she sees that the thousands of bright-eyed girls and young women who had made her halls ring with laughter and love and occasional tears,

have, all become "musicians" of a sort: their voices contribute to the "eternal music of the spheres" although admittedly in a rhythm that is not always uniform. Some voices have transcended the sublunary: Cecilia Muñoz-Palma's metes out justice; Carmen Dinglasan-Consing's has helped frame the nation's laws. Joaquina Lucas has introduced the Legion of Mary to other lands, Teresa Feria-Nieva, the Christian Family Movement to her own country. More have been heard from the helm of different educational institutions: *St. Scholastica's* own subprioress, directress, and deans at present were all once students in her classrooms. A good number have chosen to follow Our Lord in *St. Scholastica's* own and in many other convents. *St. Scholastica's* first religious vocation was one of her first pupils and boarders, Trinidad Lacson, who became a Benedictine nun in the Abbey of East Bergholt in England. The professional and scientific fields, the areas of social action, claim the time and the talents and the services of many a Scholastican alumna. Among the alumnae's latest ventures—and perhaps among the most courageous and timely—is the sponsoring, from its building to its maintenance of services, of a free vocational high school for financially poor girls in Bacolod City. But where *St. Scholastica's* daughters are shining in greatest abundance, in seeming silence and anonymity while wielding deep and unparalleled influence, is the sphere of the home. Here is their special place and here they reign and

The world is formed or torn apart as the woman nurtures or breaks the home. Thus, as *St. Scholastica's* enters a new age of big changes and bigger challenges in a world that calls for deep involvement, *St. Scholastica's* renews her commitment to service in love for each child: that each child's life might be a clear note blending harmoniously with the exquisite "music of the spheres."