

Sr. Frederica Horvath, SSS
1897-1970

“That In All Things God May Be Glorified”

Early and Young Adult Years

Sr. Frederica was born in Hungary in 1897, the fifth child of Maria Terezia Heger and Tivador (Theodore) Meszaros. World War was soon upon them, and it was a tragic period in the life of her country, as well as her own. After three and a half years in a Russian prison camp, her husband, Joseph Horvath, escaped and made his way home shortly before the Armistice. He reached his wife in September 1918, and on November 1 was shot by a half-crazed soldier in the streets of Budapest. He died a month later, but not before Frederica herself was hospitalized with influenza, which was taking a heavy toll of lives. Her mother had died when she was four, and her father-in-law in 1916, her father in 1917, and now her husband was dead. She pondered why she had been spared.

She was still recovering from the effects of the flu when she discovered the reason; for with a clarity she could only assent to, she knew what her future was to be. It was January 1919, just before her 22nd birthday, and she was on a commuter train going into Budapest when two Social Mission Sisters (predecessors of the SSS) boarded. She knew the Sisters well, as the little village of Pomez was where she had lived for four years with the Horvaths was also the train-stop for Csobanka, the equally tiny village where the Social Mission Sisters had their novitiate and a home for war orphans. But now she saw them as if for the first time and certainly with new eyes. This is what God was asking of her life. She immediately said yes and began to live with new purpose.

Life as a Religious

*“We had nothing materially, yet we had the courage and strength of our youth...
we felt certain that the Holy Spirit was indeed leading us as we set about the beginnings of our
social welfare apostolate.”*

Sister Frederica was professed in 1921. In 1923, a number of Sisters, including Sr. Margaret, formally founded the Sisters of Social Service (SSS) and adopted the Social Mission of the Church as the motivating thrust of their lives. At that time, the Sisters lived in community with a strong central authority, and gave themselves to an intense spiritual life, with a growing consciousness of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Their formation was strongly influenced by the Benedictine spirit. After spiritual formation and professional training, they dedicated themselves to responding to the needs of those who were socially, economically and politically powerless. They believed that they should not only work to *heal the wounds* of society, but should spend their lives trying to *change the conditions* that caused the wounds. They pioneered every modern means they could lay their hands on to proclaim the message that women dedicated to the Lord could, and must, change the social structures around them.

They carefully guarded their freedom to work in the world by taking simple, private vows of religion. These gifts, plus her own personal talents, were the heritage Sister Frederica brought with her to America.

Mission in the U.S. Begins

“We seek God...rooted and grounded in charity, we work together for one thing: that God may be glorified in our life and in all our actions, and that we constantly be builders in the community.”

During the 1920's the SSS spread from Hungary to neighboring Romania and Slovakia. In that post-war environment, internal chaos of every description racked Hungary. As the Sisters experienced extreme difficulties, and with the advice of clergy, what unfolded was an opportunity which Sister Margaret thought was pivotal for the development and continuance of the Community: beginning work in America.

In July, 1923, Sister Frederica and two other Sisters immigrated to Buffalo, New York. After a short time, Sr. Frederica became ill and her doctor suggested she relocate to a warmer climate. In 1925 she traveled to Los Angeles where the climate agreed with her and recovered from her illness. It was from this transfer from the Buffalo foundation that Sister Frederica came to Los Angeles in 1926 and planted the spirit and mission of the Sisters of Social Service that we know today.

It was around this time that Archbishop Cantwell attended the Eucharistic Congress in New York and heard Sr. Margaret speak. He was so impressed with the depth and vision of the Community's leader, that he soon helped Sr. Frederica find work in Los Angeles. Sr. Frederica hoped to seek out and assist Hungarians, but the Archbishop asked her to serve Mexican immigrants at the Cathedral. So by day she served the Mexican community, and in the evenings she sought out needy Hungarians. It should be noted that she was alone in this ministry, and spoke neither English nor Spanish at the time. She became a U.S. citizen in 1928, and by 1930 the Sisters had grown to 12 members in Los Angeles. Recognizing this growth, Bishop Cantwell helped the Sisters take out a loan to establish a Motherhouse. He and Fr. Joseph Sullivan, SJ, also identified key lay women who had the desire to serve God in works for the poor. These ladies comprised the first Social Service Auxiliary, a dynamic and energetic support group for the Sisters still in existence today.

In 1931 Sister Frederica traveled to Budapest for a SSS General Chapter. At that time, as the lone delegate from the U.S. and aware of the significance of her position, she wrote to Sister Lucile, “Please pray for me, dear. Just think! The future of the Sisters of Social Service is in my hands!” Given the political events in Europe at the time, which forced religious life underground, her words have a prophetic ring. Sister Frederica was indeed faithful to the mission of the SSS and at the same time allowed the Society to blossom in the American way.

Until her death in 1970, Sister Frederica saw great changes in Los Angeles and around the world. The Los Angeles community positioned its works in the broad framework of direct social services, and most

became social workers, both professionally trained and degreed. The Sisters were respected for their diverse work with many people facing challenging problems stemming from poverty. They continued parish social work and immigrant support services; they founded neighborhood community centers in Sacramento (Stanford Settlement, 1936) and Los Angeles (Regis House, 1946). The settlement houses offered citizenship classes, job training, and language classes for those new to the United States. Sister Frederica's leadership also saw the establishment of resident camps for children: Camp Mariastella in Wrightwood and Camp Oliver in San Diego.

Additionally, like their European counterparts, the Sisters in the United States always looked for innovative solutions to societal problems, trying to address not only the palpable and immediate needs of those struggling with poverty and illness, but also to work with the people themselves towards long-range independence and skill-sets. Working to impact laws and infrastructures that can bring about large-scale, systemic change for those on the margins of our society has always been a core vision for the Sisters. Sister Frederica saw that this sometimes took the form of social service work, and other times social justice work.

Ultimately, working to alleviate human suffering and poverty for individuals and families, within groups and communities, whether it be local, regional or national, was an integral part of the charism that Sister Frederica established throughout her life in America. At the time of her death in 1970 the community had blossomed and there were Sisters in California, Kansas City, Oregon, Taiwan and Mexico.

From a Sister at the time of Sr. Frederica's funeral

"Being present in the midst of the Sisters, I am very aware that this Community came into being through this valiant woman's consistent dedication."