

Year of Mother Josepha



Reflection No. 2: Mother Josepha, Hendrina Stenmanns

A woman of the Lower Rhineland – Rooted in her Home Area

“In terris positus, in caelestibus habitavit” - “Both feet on the ground, heart in heaven!”

(Inscription on a picture of St. Benedict in Kremsmuenster Monastery, Austria)

This statement, actually applied to St. Benedict, aptly characterises our Mother Josepha.

1. “Both feet on the ground”

Growing up in the early years of industrialisation, Hendrina saw poverty spread through broad sectors of the population. Her mother taught her to notice the poor in the village and help out with small gifts. This alert attitude, to have an eye for the hidden needs of others, suited her sympathetic nature and increasingly became one of her basic characteristics. She was already becoming the person described on the memorial plaque on her parental home as “the great benefactress of her home village”.

The eldest of seven, Hendrina soon developed a sense of responsibility and natural motherly concern for her younger brothers and sisters, a trait that continued to develop in the convent. She was a great support for her parents, not only in the household but also in the upbringing of her younger brothers and sisters. In the growing family she soon learned to make good use of time, to plan well, take on small tasks independently and assign them to the younger children as well.

Like any ordinary villager, Hendrina entered the labour force at a young age; by weaving silk she contributed to the upkeep of the large family. In addition she managed quietly and discreetly to help many a shy, needy person in the village from her own savings. Her material help enabled Lambert Welbers, her father’s apprentice, to enter the Mission House in Steyl as a candidate.

Already becoming visible in a small way was the characteristic that blossomed later in Steyl as the number of sisters and amount of work grew: she had an ingenious talent for organisation and improvisation. Everything Hendrina did looked so simple and natural. She was incredibly alert, rapidly grasped a situation and was able to make a quick decision. She made no ado about it. She was simply present, there when needed. And always with a quiet cheerfulness.

Hendrina’s eyes were not only alert to need and suffering in the neighbourhood; she experienced suffering and death in her own family. She was 20 when her sister Gertrude died at the age of six. A year later Heinrich, the eldest of her brothers, died aged 19. She shared the sorrow of her parents.

Hendrina had reached the age when, normally speaking, life decisions are made. She really wanted to enter a convent, to become a Franciscan like her aunt in a neighbouring town. The situation at home, however, as well as the kulturkampf, made that impossible. Instead of complaining, she allowed the suffering to transform her. It did not make her hard but, rather, even more compassionate. It was during this time that she joined the Franciscan movement. It gave her life a deep, spiritual orientation that completely permeated her ordinary daily life.

When she was 26, her mother died. She had promised her mother to put her personal wishes aside and remain with her father and brothers and sister, taking care of them. Karl, the youngest, was just eight years old. Every door was closed to her, her plans and personal wishes thwarted. Not a word of complaint or regret could be detected. She took the situation as it was and accepted it as her task. She was even able to give the situation a positive turn by increasing her ministry to others, to people who had to bear still greater suffering.

Later on, in the convent, she had only one single sentence of gratitude for those and subsequent years: “What great thanks I owe to the Lord for the tremendous grace of my calling to serve him in the Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit. Thanks, profound thanks to the dear, good Lord for such a great grace.” At that age she was already an interiorly firm and mature young woman, able to forget herself and to be there to help others in their need.

2. “*Her heart in heaven*”

Hendrina had both feet on the ground, yet permeating and shining through all she did was the love of her heart that was firmly anchored in God. Let us take a look at Hendrina’s inner path.

We know that she prepared very seriously and intensively for her first Communion, aided by a small diocesan booklet; she was almost 13 at that time. Probably she wrote her own prayers on the first blank pages of the booklet. God supported her life, she took that almost for granted. At holy Mass and Communion she experienced his confirming presence. Regular, later on daily, attendance at Mass was part of her schedule and rhythm of life. Hendrina knew she was being led by God’s bountiful providence. It gave her an inner security and serenity.

An early devotion to the angels is apparent from a small book with Hendrina’s name in it, “Devotions in honour of the holy Angels, especially the holy Guardian Angels”. She had learned to take the angels into the Eucharistic service, as it were, because later she wrote to Sr. Gonzaga in Argentina: “Make a tabernacle in your heart where the holy Triune God constantly dwells and remind your holy guardian angel to adore him without ceasing.”

Another book with her name and with the rather poetic title “Eucharistic Blossoms of Love” testifies to Hendrina’s marked Eucharistic orientation at a young age. The book was obviously frequently used, especially the sections on “Celebration of holy Mass”, “Silent Mass”, “After holy Communion”, “Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament”, and so on. It gives eloquent testimony of how she was formed by the Eucharist and silent adoration of the Lord.

As a young woman Hendrina often went to Steyl to visit her protégé Lambert Welbers, but even more for the perpetual adoration in the Mission House at Pentecost. M. Anna, Theresia Sicke, related that Hendrina first visited Steyl in 1879 and that from then on “she came annually for the 40-hour prayer on the holy Feast of Pentecost ... Her recollection and steadfast prayer were amazing.” M. Anna spoke of Hendrina’s “faithful devotion to the Blessed Sacrament”. It was a trait Hendrina shared with her future companion, Helena Stollenwerk.

Hendrina’s Eucharistic disposition was known to the curate of Issum, Fr. Veels. In January 1884 he wrote to Arnold Janssen that he could give her “the very best recommendation in every sense. She has always had the wish to enter religious life, ... has for many years gone to confession every week and, although she lives more than 15 minutes walk from the church and has to take care of the household, attends holy Mass every day.” Weekly confession naturally included reception of Communion. It was not common for a young woman with the amount of work that Hendrina Stenmanns had to cope with to lead such an intensive spiritual life.

For the little group in Steyl, the germ cell of the future sisters’ congregation, the Eucharist was the source of strength for the daily, heavy kitchen work during the years in the Mission House. We could say the maids lived a “Eucharistic cycle”: from Mass in the morning, where they frequently received holy Communion, to the noon half hour of prayer, and on to Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the evening. The anticipation of these daily ‘spiritual supports’ permeated and animated their daily life. We will never be able to fathom the effects those years still have for us today.