

# IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR FOUNDRRESS

*Sister M. Wilhelmina*

APRIL 13, 1924–MAY 29, 2019

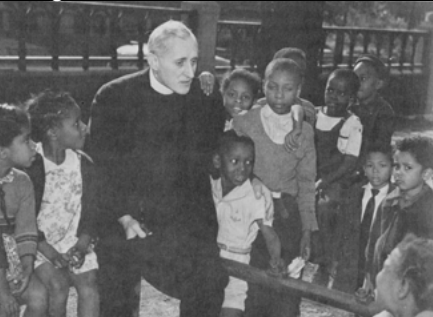
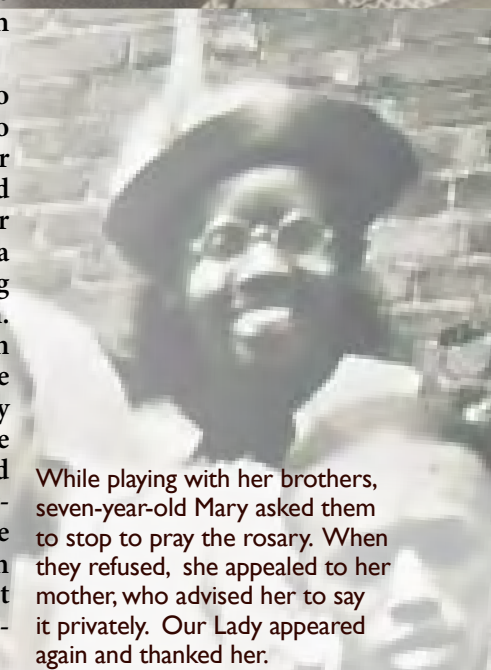
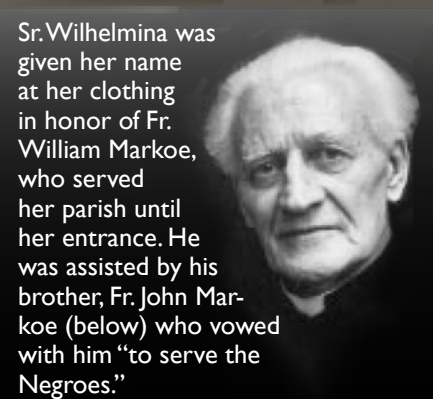
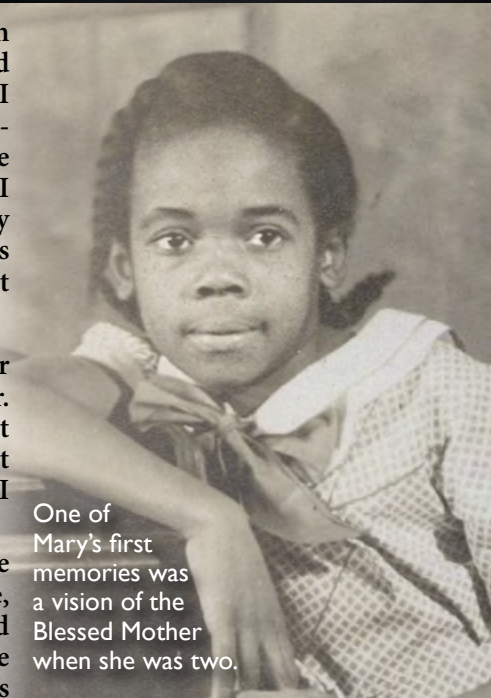
Just around the time you were receiving our last newsletter, which included the commemoration of our beloved Sr. Wilhelmina's 75 years in vows and 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, we were preparing our hearts to bid her our final farewells. On May 27<sup>th</sup>, it became evident that her death was imminent. We watched and prayed all together and in turns throughout the following hours. Sister passed quietly and peacefully unto eternity on May 29<sup>th</sup>, the eve of the Ascension. But before we share some of the beautiful details of Sister's last days, especially the moments surrounding her death, we want you to know more about this extraordinary woman's life, using her own words, from a short autobiography we didn't discover until after her death:

"First of all, I was born Mary Elizabeth Lancaster on Palm Sunday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1924, the daughter and second child of Oscar and Ella Lancaster. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1934 I made my First Holy Communion, an unforgettable experience when Our Lord asked me if I would be His. He seemed to be such a handsome and wonderful Man, I agreed immediately. Then He told me to meet Him every Sunday at Holy Communion. I said nothing about this conversation to anyone, believing that everyone that went to Holy Communion heard Our Lord talk to them.

In those days I hardly knew what belonging to Our Lord meant. At last, several years later, my confessor, Fr. Lawrence Rost, whom I saw every Saturday at Holy Ghost Church two blocks up the street, asked if I ever thought about being a Sister. I had not of course, but he thought I could be a good Sister.

I went to work on the idea right away and wrote to the superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, Maryland for direction. Mother Mary Consuella Clifford wrote me back, told me that I was too young to enter the convent and advised that I finish high school first. I was 13 years of age and graduating that year from the eighth grade.

I had been in public school until then. My parents, who did not want me to go to the public high school, got to work and founded St. Joseph's Catholic High School for Negroes which lasted until Archbishop Ritter put an end to segregation of Negroes in the Diocese. During my four years in high school I sort of put the idea of becoming a Sister on the back burner and applied myself to learning as much as I could about everything there was to learn. Unfortunately, my parents spoiled me and let me sit down much too much to books and papers when I should have been up cooking, sewing and doing household work. My mother was a bookworm too, and she is mentioned in the little book, *Negro Catholic Writers*, but as being deceased many years before her death actually happened. Underground, or along with the religious desire, was my desire to become a writer. I wrote my first poem when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I soon had a notebook full of rhymes, but this was not what I really wanted. I wanted to write stories, good fiction, like *Little Women*, and so on.



Ella Theresa Madden Lancaster, granddaughter of Mary Madden, a slave. Ella was a school teacher before marrying one of her first converts.

Sr. Wilhelmina was given her name at her clothing in honor of Fr. William Markoe, who served her parish until her entrance. He was assisted by his brother, Fr. John Markoe (below) who vowed with him "to serve the Negroes."

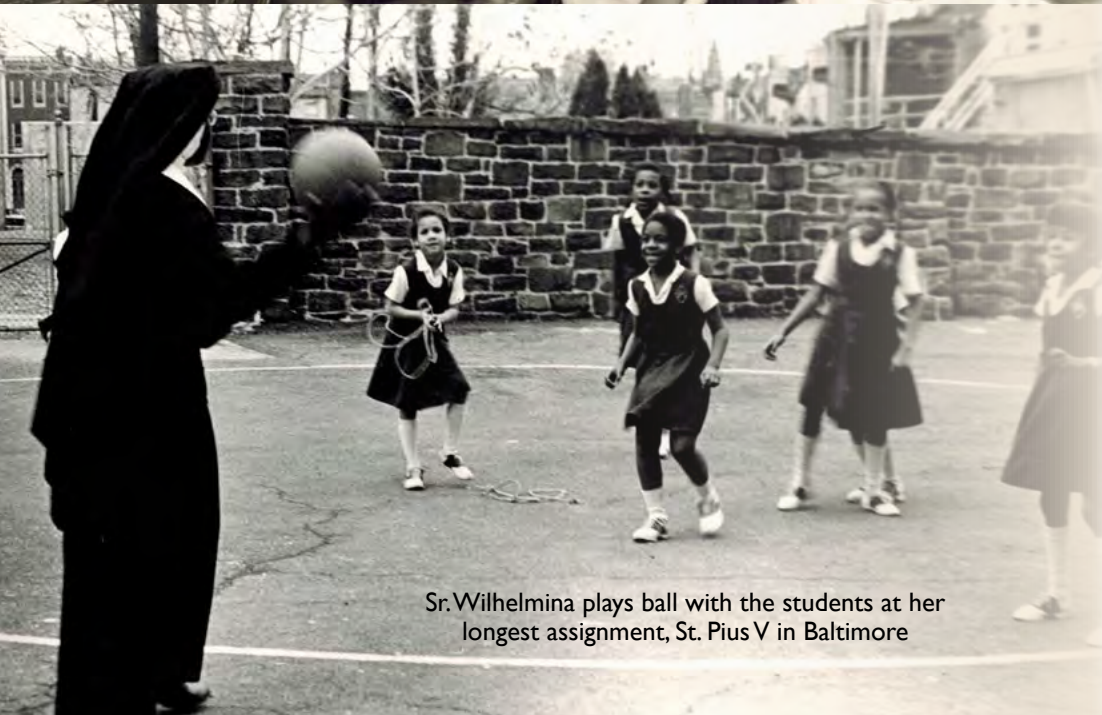
One of Mary's first memories was a vision of the Blessed Mother when she was two.

While playing with her brothers, seven-year-old Mary asked them to stop to pray the rosary. When they refused, she appealed to her mother, who advised her to say it privately. Our Lady appeared again and thanked her.

Sr. Wilhelmina during her first year of teaching, at St. Cyprian's, Washington DC (1946)



The day of my graduation from high school, two Oblate Sisters of Providence were present. When I walked out of the church, I went straight to them standing in the vestibule and told them that I wanted to be one of them. They were shocked, but I had done what had to be done. So that September, at age 17, I left my parents' house for Baltimore, Maryland. Sister Philomena Michau, one of the Sisters who attended my graduation and who was superior of St. Frances Home for Girls in Normandy, MO gave me a trunk. Two of her Sisters who happened to be going to Baltimore accompanied me on my journey there in September. I knew that the novitiate was a time of trial during which the community would look me over and decide whether I had a vocation to it or not. That September day, however, when I entered the novitiate chapel for the first time, that same Lord Who spoke to me in my First Communion, welcomed me lovingly, put His arms around me and promised that from then on I would be His. My two and a half years in the novitiate were a happy time, during which I learned from a fellow novice about True Devotion to Mary taught by St. Louis De Montfort. We had no book about it; Sister Alma simply reiterated emphatically that I had no true devotion to Mary because I did not belong to her as her slave. I was so moved by this that I went to the Novice Mistress, Sister Mary Inez Colthirst, and asked if I could become a slave of Mary, like Sister Alma was. Sister Inez, amused, grabbed the chain I was wearing and said that this was the sign that all Oblates were slaves of Mary. The miraculous medal and chain were placed around the neck of each novice when she received the habit.



Sr. Wilhelmina plays ball with the students at her longest assignment, St. Pius V in Baltimore



Special thanks to Sharon Knecht of the OSP archives for pictures opposite and above.



In the music room

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, I was allowed to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In September I was brought to the Motherhouse and assigned to work in the pantry. Soon after New Year's I was given a fourth grade class whose teacher was being transferred elsewhere. So my teaching career began, a kaleidoscope of good days and bad days that I was constantly praying to be delivered from. I loved study and school, but not teaching. Not until August 1966 did I finally graduate from college. During the 22 years between 1944 and 1966 I had a short, happy stint at housework - mainly cleaning - at St. Rita's Residence in St. Louis and then at St. Frances Home for Girls where I learned that children had worries and broken hearts.



Improvement on the Oblates' habit that began in the fifties was completed in August 1962. I was happy about it; uniformity was desired by all the members of the community, and this was a beautiful uniformity. It lasted only five years. In January 1967 individual Sisters were allowed to experiment with the headdress. I was not for this at all.

After too strictly disciplining a student who complained, I fell out of the classroom for good in February 1972. I was brought back to the Motherhouse in Baltimore, newly built on Gun Road. For the first time in my life, the superior general, Sister Mary of Good Counsel Baptiste, asked me what I wanted to do. I immediately replied that I would like to write a history of the Order. That is how I got to work on archival material. Around this time I became very despondent, feeling that I had failed as a teacher, that I could neither teach nor cook, and therefore why should I be alive. With my head on the desk in my cell, I was inspired with a poem honoring Our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament. When I finished writing it - and it came quite easily - I felt consoled and satisfied.

Sr. Wilhelmina has always loved music. She was assigned to assist Sr. Benigna in the music department from 1972-1995. Sr. Benigna (Marie Holland) was the life-long friend and accompanist of Marian Anderson. She sacrificed her promising musical career the year before the latter's famous Lincoln Memorial concert.



Sr. Benigna (also above in wheelchair) warmly befriended and mentored Sr. Wilhelmina, and they collaborated on compositions. Sr. Wilhelmina later said that leaving Sr. Benigna and her other Oblate Sisters was like leaving her family all over again.



I immediately took it to Sister Benigna who resided in the infirmary wing, but was still the community's top-most musician. She was not for any of the musical nonsense that was going on, and I knew that she would give my poem, "We Do Believe", quick shrift if that is what she thought it deserved. She read it, smiled, and then said, "I am going to write music for this." In a couple of weeks it was done, and she was teaching it at choir practice. Sister Benigna was one of the few who wore the traditional habit, I mean no hair-showing. I had unfortunately gotten into the new habit - from June 1971 until Holy Saturday 1974 I was in it - to my great regret. Our Blessed Mother helped me put the traditional habit back on when her Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima came to visit our Mount, and the Sisters went in procession to the gate to meet it. Needless to say, my return to the habit was not just for that occasion, but for the rest of my life.



Sr. Wilhelmina visits her mother, Ella, in St. Louis a few years before her death at the age of 95. During her lifetime, she helped to make at least one hundred Catholic converts.

I had no thought or desire of leaving my community in those days, but I was gung-ho for seeing it reformed. We had made a wrong turn, I said, and should go back. The rule of silence and monthly chapter were long gone. Sisters were invited—I was working in the archives then—to submit a replacement or improvement of Chapter. I wrote something and handed it in but never heard anything of it. Something else that I wrote in December 1972, "Is There Light at the End of the Tunnel?" was presented at a community meeting and caused a stir. It suggested that the Oblates recognize themselves as three-pronged, one of which would be a contemplative unit. My suggestion nettled those who wanted to see us give up the habit completely. Others who were not as far out as this nonetheless saw the contemplative life as something medieval, dangerous and unjust.



Sr. Wilhelmina as archivist



One of Sister's final pictures as an Oblate Sister of Providence

The Chapter of 1973 was an education for me. Although not an elected delegate, I was appointed an extra secretary, and I witnessed all that happened without being able to open my mouth. All Oblates had been allowed to submit proposals to the Chapter, and I submitted mine that a contemplative unit be formed. In Chapter after Chapter I proposed the idea. I thought I had the perfect



Sr. Wilhelmina as founding Prioress before the Pilgrim Virgin statue at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Elmhurst, PA, and with the seminarians (above.) They awarded her the “prestigious” Green Horse trophy in early 1996 as a token of affection and gratitude for her presence (right.)



wording in 1993, that a “traditional house be established” and this passed. It was hamstrung from the very beginning. I saw nothing ahead of me but silent perseverance in the community until I died.

Around the same time I learned of the arrival of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter in Scranton, Pennsylvania from Wigratzbad, Germany. I went with friends in a van to attend Fraternity events such as the solemn dedication of St. Gregory’s Chapel in Elmhurst. The Holy Father’s Motu Proprio of 1988 *Ecclesia Dei* was news that I latched onto as salvific. I was determined to return to and attend the Traditional Latin Mass as much as possible. When a friend of mine, John Ambs, driver of the van to Scranton, suggested that I join the two Sisters in Scranton and form with them a traditional house there, I did not hesitate. It was Mr. Ambs who collected funds for my entry into the aegis of the Fraternity and presented it, along with my arrival May 27, 1995 to Fr. Arnaud Devillers, FSSP. I came bag and baggage that day, most of the books and papers I have since destroyed or returned to the Oblate Sisters of Providence since my break from them June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1998.



After many years of writing to Pope St. John Paul II, Sister finally met him in 1998 in a pilgrimage of gratitude for *Ecclesia Dei*. “Thank you, Holy Father, for everything!” she said.

Sixty years after my first vows to God on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, I renewed my vows in the Benedictine manner, signing the same document that I had signed in 1998 and which the Bishop signed on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004. It would seem I did a very foolish thing. After fifty years as an Oblate Sister of Providence, I started religious life anew as the foundress of a new community affiliated with the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. To those who say that my leaving my old community to found a new one didn’t make sense, I reply that it is understandable only in the life of faith. When other people came, I welcomed them because I wanted to share what I had. ‘The disciples were persevering in prayer with Mary the Mother of Jesus.’ This is a perfect description of the religious sisterhood that formed. If there’s anything I would want to pass on to the community, it would be: Devotion to Our Blessed Mother, True Devotion to Our Blessed Mother.”



In Starrucca, Pennsylvania, 2004

Now we wish also to relate to you the final days of our beloved Foundress. We had all seen a gradual weakening in Sister, to be expected in her nineties! As the novices continued to see to her daily needs as her “angels,” one prayed in particular to witness a preparatory grace before her death. The Novice’s prayer was answered when, on the morning of January 10<sup>th</sup>, she went into Sr. Wilhelmina’s cell to find her smiling radiantly with “a very pure and innocent expression.” “Jesus, Jesus! He is the Good Shepherd. He wants everyone to go to heaven! He says everyone is supposed to go to heaven!” When asked if she had seen the Lord, she answered, “Yes, I saw Jesus! Everyone in the world, everyone should go to heaven.

Preparing our first priest guest quarters in 2004



In Kansas City, 2006



Heaven, heaven, I want to go to heaven!" She then turned her eyes to the crucifix, and to the Novice's query, said "Yes, I look at the cross. We should meditate everyday on the cross, every single day... He wants everyone to go to heaven, Oh, how I want to go to heaven! It is the right thing to do, you should embrace your cross," and on consoling Our Lord: "That is right, it is like entering into eternity...I want to thank God and praise Him for what He has done for me, I want to thank him for what he has done for you and I want to thank Him for all He has done for all my Sisters." A few days later, the thought returned and as she was gazing at the cross, said "I'm thinking how Our Lord suffered for us on this cross! I want to pray for the dying! Do you know when I will go to heaven? When will I go to heaven? I really want to go to heaven!"

Sister Wilhelmina had been sleeping more and more during the spring months. She became completely unresponsive in the afternoon of May 26<sup>th</sup>, only the second day she was unable to get out of bed in all of her elderly years. Her last 'meal' was her favorite - a couple spoons of homemade vanilla ice cream. Sister received the Last Rites in the morning before our Mass. Her nurse came that evening to do a thorough checkup, and her conclusion was that Sister had no more than 24 hours to live. Sisters stayed at her bedside that night in turns, beginning the prayers for the dying.

On Monday, Sister received not only the Apostolic Blessing, but also first blessings from two newly ordained priests. During the conventual Mass, Mother Abbess stayed with her, and just as the bells for the consecration rang, Sister outstretched both of her arms and moaned deeply, just as if she were sharing in her frail body the Sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross, taking place in the Abbey church just across the courtyard from her room. The Sisters from Ava returned later that day, and not one Sister wanted to leave her bedside. We recited Matins all together in her room at 11PM. There were at least five or six Sisters praying next to her all night, with many others dozing off right in the room or nearby in the hallway outside. Sister made it through the night, though her breathing was becoming more labored.

On Tuesday morning, one of the newly ordained priests, Fr. Daniel Powers, FSSP, offered Mass in her room - only the fourth Mass of his priesthood! She continued to be unresponsive until after the conventual Mass, when all the Sisters packed into her cell once again, and began singing all of her favorite hymns. Though she did not open her eyes, she was clearly hearing us, and even did her best to join in at certain points. Her nurse was later astounded to know of her responsiveness and ability to sing as her blood



Sister was one of our best actresses in skits and funny songs!



A visit from her niece, Rebecca

Gower, 2008





Sister proudly brings her updated profession chart to Mother Cecilia after our Constitutions were approved by *Ecclesia Dei* in 2014.



pressure and oxygen levels would seem to preclude that kind of exertion. Sister's final words were uttered - or sung rather - at "O Maria" during one of her favorite hymns: "Hail Holy Queen Enthroned Above." A few minutes later, as we sang "Had I but Mary's sinless heart to love Thee with, my dearest King; *Oh with what bursts of fervent praise, Thy goodness Jesus, would I sing.*" from Jesus, My Lord, My God, My All, her face changed drastically, lighting up with a truly heavenly smile for about 10 seconds, as though she were granted a vision of the eternity awaiting her, where she will be singing His praises forever. After about a half hour of singing, Sister returned to her unresponsive state, and so would remain until the next day.

The next morning, the community gathered after the morning offices, and prayed the Rosary. Our chaplain and Fr. Powers also came for a time to recite the prayers for the dying over her. Because of her extremely labored breathing and low oxygen and blood pressure, we thought she would slip away that morning. Little did any of us know that she was waiting to pass from this life in the way of her beloved St. Bede.

Sister Wilhelmina once was asked who was her favorite Benedictine saint. To the Sister's surprise, she replied, "St. Bede the Venerable, of course! I became a Benedictine on his feast you know." Indeed on his feast, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1995, she came to Elmhurst, PA to begin the order, and this is celebrated as the founding day of our community.

At first, the Sisters (and the nurse) thought that Sr. Wilhelmina might take her leave on the calendar date of St. Bede's feast, May 27<sup>th</sup>. But the liturgical feast when he died was Rogation Wednesday, Vigil of the Ascension, when he expired peacefully as the evening Offices were being completed. He was then reckoned to have died on the Ascension, since First Vespers of the feast had been chanted, and it was an hour after sunset. Following not only in her beloved saint's footsteps in the love of the Divine Office and our Blessed Lady, our dear Sr. Wilhelmina followed him even in her manner of death.

On May 29<sup>th</sup>, just after a Sister brought the Pilgrim Virgin statue from Fatima into her room, the inspiration came to dress Sr. Wilhelmina in the habit once again as best as we could, remembering her wish to die in it. We realized later the uncanny parallel to the time she had reassumed it in 1974, when the Pilgrim statue came to the Oblate Sisters. The feast of the Ascension had begun with First Vespers, and the whole community assembled at 7:00 PM in Sister's cell while Mother Abbess read to Sister Wilhelmina and all of us the various notes of assurance of prayers, along with prayer requests from family and friends. At this time Sister was not actively conscious, though it cannot be doubted that she indeed was taking all to heart as she lay clutching her profession crucifix and her well-used rosary. It was a very joyful time for the whole community, and all were at ease in Sister's cell in a way we had not been for several days of waiting and watching.

"May God have mercy on me! I trust in the mercy of God. Oh, I am grateful to be here! I'm so grateful to be here! I'm grateful to be alive and to serve Him in this community. I'm praying for Mother Cecilia," Sister said in 2014. The two have always had a close bond.



Catching up with Fr. Devillers in 2017.



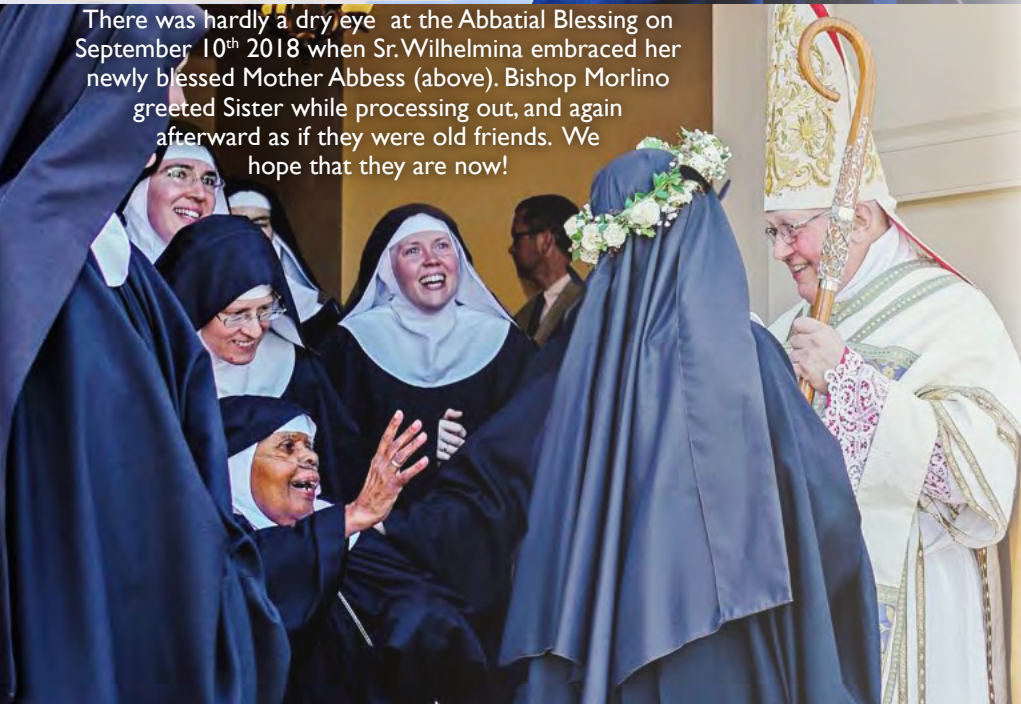
Sister with her profession crucifix, which she also held when dying.



After singing some more of her favorite Marian hymns, the community chanted Compline in her cell. At the close of Compline, there is an ancient custom to receive a blessing with holy water for the night from the superior. Mother Abbess intoned the customary antiphon: *Vidi aquam egredientem de templo, a latere dextro, alleluia: Et omnes ad quos pervenit aqua ista, salvi facti sunt, et dicent: alleluia, alleluia.* (I saw water flowing out of the Temple, from its right side, Alleluia: And all who came to this water were saved, And they shall say: Alleluia, Alleluia.)

As the Sisters continued the antiphon, Mother Abbess froze. There were several moments we had feared this might be the last, but at this particular moment, Mother Abbess' eyes were fixed upon Sr. Wilhelmina, who had suddenly taken on an air of profound peace. Intuitively, after Mother Abbess blessed herself with holy water, she sprinkled Sr. Wilhelmina's head, then again copiously, signing a cross on her head with her thumb in the water, "as if she were baptizing her again," as one Sister commented. Mother Abbess gently stroked her cheeks, and as she withdrew her hand (but not her gaze) to continue blessing the remainder of the community, Sister Wilhelmina breathed her last, peacefully and without a struggle.

There was hardly a dry eye at the Abbatial Blessing on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2018 when Sr. Wilhelmina embraced her newly blessed Mother Abbess (above). Bishop Morlino greeted Sister while processing out, and again afterward as if they were old friends. We hope that they are now!



The timing lined up exactly with the antiphon, as she received holy water from the right hand of her successor who was blessed as the community's first Abbess less than nine months before, whom Sr. Wilhelmina ardently venerated as Christ Himself. Sister received the water from the temple of the Lord's side, which was symbolized by the Abbey church, and she died in the shadow of this edifice likewise consecrated less than nine months before. She had consummated her vows which were a "second Baptism," and took her flight to commemorate her first Baptism, the anniversary of which was the very next day - May 30<sup>th</sup> of 1924. The community sang the Mass of the Ascension the following day. It was through the veil of this life that she was able to complete the antiphon and testify to the water through which she and the saints of Christ are saved, to sing "Alleluia" to her Bridegroom forever.

Sr. Wilhelmina's final year has seen the fulfillment of many dreams, with the Abbatial blessing, the construction and Consecration of the Abbey Church, her Diamond Jubilee and 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, an increase in vocations "particularly those of her own race" for whom she always prayed, and the sending off of our first foundation. Mysteriously, she promised to accompany our Ava Sisters, and her prophecy is now understood.



Spontaneously, Mother Abbess knelt at Sr. Wilhelmina's side after blessing the Sisters, and all the Sisters instinctively knelt also as Mother Abbess gently said "She's gone." Mother Abbess began to weep and said "Oh, Sister, Sister, pray for us," as she kissed the limp hand, and in an eloquent gesture, took Sr. Wilhelmina's thumb to trace the sign of the cross upon her own forehead, receiving the blessing of her predecessor and foundress even as Sr. Wilhelmina had not departed without receiving the blessing of her new Mother Abbess.

Mother Abbess wept again, and overwhelmed with gratitude that it was given to us to witness such a grace, cried out, "How much God loves us! How much He loves our community!" Our Lord could not have chosen a more fitting nor consoling moment to withdraw the treasure of our community back to Himself. The Sisters also wept, but as all testified, the tears were more of joy than of grief. Our loving Lord had seen to it that the entire community be present to witness the holy death of our foundress, after completing the final Office of the day, and the final Office of Sister Wilhelmina's long and venerable life.



Left: Sr. Wilhelmina's final smile as the community sang "Jesus My Lord, My God, My All!"

Below: The chanting of the "Subvenite" just moments after her death.



Fr. Devillers encouraged all of us to follow our foundress to her new foundation in heaven.

The *Subvenite* - the traditional prayer for a deceased community member was then chanted, as the church bell tolled 95 times. Sister was then crowned with flowers and clothed with her cuculla, her Solemn Profession chart placed at her feet. Sisters then took turns keeping watch by the hour as Sister lay in state in the Chapter house. They consecutively prayed the psalms for the dead until Friday morning, when a sunbeam poured in and robed Sister in glory, leaving the shadow of a crucifix at her feet. Sisters remarked on the beauty Sister Wilhelmina took on, as she seemed to smile more and more until the coffin (made by Fr. Joseph Terra, FSSP) was closed and her beautiful face could no longer be seen.



Father Arnaud Devillers, who had founded the order with Sr. Wilhelmina in 1995, offered the funeral Mass. Following the Mass, he remarked that out of the many Sisters he had met, he had full confidence in Sister Wilhelmina's genuineness because of her humility. It was upon that foundation that a new community has arisen for the glory of God.

Many years ago, our first chaplain asked Sister Wilhelmina "why did you become a religious?" Her instantaneous reply was: "because I was in love with Our Lord." It could be easily said even in her declining years that she never fell out of love with Him. Let us unite in loving prayers that the love she bore for her Divine Bridegroom likewise bears her directly to His embrace. God willing, we will be collecting Sister's life and works in a larger volume in the near future! May God reward you all for your kindness, condolences and prayers.



As we buried our treasure, our tears fell into Sr. Wilhelmina's grave, which the Sisters which the Sisters had dug by hand.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE!