

# REMEMBERING THINGS PAST:

By Sister Margaret Clarke



*Catherine Kerst, age 13, at the time of her graduation from eighth grade*

Catherine Kerst (later to be Mother Scholastica) was born in Meuringen, Prussia (now a part of Belgium), in 1847. Her family emigrated to the United States in 1852 and settled near St. Paul, Minnesota. At the age of eleven Catherine made her first Holy Communion, and it was at this time that she decided to become a Sister. In 1860, when she entered high school, she told her parish priest, a monk from St. John's Abbey, that she wished to enter the convent. He assumed that she would want to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph, who were her high school teachers. Catherine surprised him by saying that she wished to become a Benedictine Sister—a community with which she was unacquainted. She had developed a great devotion to the Eucharist, and explained to him: "I read somewhere that they receive Our Blessed Lord once a week oftener than other Sisters." Catherine could do the math: "If I should be a Benedictine for ten years, I would receive 520 more Holy Communions than I would in any other sisterhood. That would mean everything to me."

Thus it was, in 1862, and two days after the foundation of the community, Catherine entered the Benedictine Sisters at Shakopee, Minnesota. The small community struggled with poverty for all of its relatively short existence. In 1877, at the recommendation of Abbot Alexius Edelbrock, a close friend of her family, the by-now-Sister Scholastica transferred to the Convent of St. Benedict at St. Joseph, Minnesota. Three years later, the same Abbot appointed her prioress of that community. One of her first tasks was to absorb the members of her former community into St. Benedict's. In her nine years in office there, she established hospitals, orphanages, schools for native American children and took on parish schools over a large part of central Minnesota. By the time that the community was ready to hold a free election, they were exhausted from "Hurricane Scholastica," and elected a new prioress who was more oriented to the contemplative life.



*Sister Scholastica Kerst, final profession at St. Gertrude's in Shakopee, 1869*



# “SHE BUILT MY DIOCESE”

As prioress at St. Benedict's, she had come to Duluth in 1881 to survey the possibility of work there: between 1884 and 1888 her community had accepted teaching positions in five parish schools and had opened a hospital. In 1890 the Diocese of Duluth was established with James McGolrick as its first Bishop. He consulted with the Benedictine Sisters in Duluth as to the possibility of their becoming a part of a new independent foundation. Many of them were enthusiastic about the prospect. Negotiations with St. Benedict's were not entirely amicable, but by 1892 Mother Scholastica and 31 other Sisters had taken up residence in Duluth as an independent community. (The early history of the Duluth Community is available elsewhere.)

Mother Scholastica did not hesitate to carry on her business of building the Church in northeastern Minnesota, and by the time of her death in 1911 the Sisters were staffing 18 elementary (parish) schools, had four secondary schools, owned 5 hospitals, an orphanage, a retirement home, and a School of Nursing. The Community had grown from 32 to 161 living members. The Community had built a hospital, a motherhouse/academy near downtown Duluth, and in 1909 had moved to a new and splendid building in the Kenwood neighborhood. On one occasion Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul was visiting. "Tell me, Mother," he asked, "what is the secret of your success?" She replied, "I do not think there is any secret about it. We just plod along, and when we fail, which frequently happens, we take courage and try again."



Above: Mother Scholastica, Duluth, 1895  
Lower photo: Mother Scholastica in her sitting room  
at the Villa in 1909

Mother Scholastica was deeply loved by her Community and loved each one of them in return. In 1910, shortly after the Community had moved to the Kenwood site, her health began to fail. Her mother died, which was a great blow to her, and she suffered from what the doctors thought was sciatica. It was recommended that she go to Sacred Heart Sanitarium in Milwaukee for a prolonged rest cure. When this brought no improvement, Dr. Magie of Duluth went to visit and told her that she should be hospitalized. She returned to St. Mary's Hospital, where she was diagnosed with cancer, and she then asked to return to the Villa to await her death.

In the spring of 1911 she decided to clothe one final group of novices. Sister Scholastica Bush recalls: "Mother was very ill, and by then confined to her bed. After Mass was over, we new novices came one by one to her bedside to receive our long rosary, and to get our new names. She drew me to her and said 'You are to be Sister Mary Scholastica.' I protested, weeping, but Mother added, 'I wanted greatly to give the Holy Habit once more just so I could give out my name. Every Benedictine community should have a Sister Scholastica, and I was afraid the Sisters would not give out that name. I chose you because you have had it so hard and I wanted to give you a little something on the side.'"

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## Mother Scholastica Kerst, *Continued from page 5*



*Left to right: Mother Scholastica with her nurse, Sister Walburga Kaminski; the altar in Mother Scholastica's sickroom, 1911; funeral procession to Gethsemane Cemetery, June 14, 1911.*

In her last days, Mother Scholastica's greatest regret was that she was unable to go to chapel for Community prayers and Mass. She was able to receive Holy Communion frequently, however, and an altar was set up in her bedroom for occasional celebration of Mass. In one of her last instructions to the Community, she says: "My prayer has always been. . .give me souls. That is the way I worked for my children in school and that is the way I have tried to work for my Sisters, and I gave you into the hands of our Heavenly Father. I would like to have stayed with you a little longer and reach my fiftieth anniversary, but if this is what God wants, I am resigned." She encouraged the Sisters to welcome manual labor, recalling that at the Sanitarium she saw Sisters from other communities who "were nervous wrecks because they would never sweep a room, wash a dish, make a fire or cook a meal." Most of all, she begged her Sisters to love each other, to be kind and accepting: "I would suggest that everyone write in her little memo-book the resolution to practice sisterly love with the greatest possible fervor and earnestness." And finally, "I recognized in each of you one of my children; I considered you a child of mine, each and every one of you, from the day you entered the convent."

Mother Scholastica died peacefully in the early evening of June 11, 1911. There was a great outpouring of grief from her Community, her friends, the bishop and clergy, and all of those she had touched in her life. The funeral was held at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Bishop McGolrick, in his sermon, praised her: "I thank God over and over again for the grace given to me of such a dear friend—in my city and my life....She held a firm grasp on all details of business, a strong common sense in prosecuting every work undertaken. She saw the gradual growth of the work from its infancy to its present vigor and thanked God for his grace given her to do so much. ...May her good work grow and prosper. Her prayer was that her Community might continue to spread more and more, doing good for souls and glorifying God." To another friend at another time, he said what has come to be a summing up of her life: "She built my diocese." In the nearly 120 years of its existence, the St. Scholastica Community has in many ways continued Mother Scholastica's project of building the Diocese of Duluth: in early years by teaching in the parish schools and in schools owned by the Community, by administering and working in the hospitals and other institutions; at the present time through our sponsored institutions, particularly the Benedictine Health System, St. Mary's Medical Center, and The College of St. Scholastica.

*Quotations are from a dictated autobiography, memoirs of Sister Scholastica Bush, and notes taken of Mother Scholastica's addresses to the Community. Photos from Monastery Archives.*