

December 6, 2018: Wreck of the Deutschland and Mother Clara's Birthday

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Today we mark two special events in the life of our congregation and in the life of our US Province of Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Both events celebrate the giving of life and remind us that giving birth to new life entails agony and surrender, suffering and immense joy.

Mother Clara Pfaender was born Anna Theresia Pfaender on December 6, 1827 in Hallenburg, Germany. Birthdays remind us that birthing is a process of agonizing pain that mothers endure in order to bring forth new life. Great suffering is followed by overwhelming joy, as the sounds and feelings of new life reach the mother's ears and the baby is joyously wrapped in its' mother's arms. Each birthday is an opportunity to celebrate the growth of the previous year and to look to the coming year with hope.

On that fateful date in 1875, as Mother Clara celebrated her 48th birthday with the Sisters in Salzkotten, 5 sisters had already boarded a ship called *the Deutschland* on their way to the United States. Their names are forever etched in history because of what occurred on that date and memorialized in poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins, but when they bid farewell to the Sisters in Salzkotten, they knew even then that they would likely never return to the land of their birth. Mother Clara had commissioned them to join the 19 sisters who had already traveled to America over the previous 3 years to serve the immigrant poor in this far-away land. Travel in those days was difficult and costly, so these sisters knew that as they walked up the boarding ramp and onto the ship, they would never again set foot on German soil. Likewise, Mother Clara knew that her growing community in Salzkotten was giving birth to new life in the distant country of the United States, but that this new life required a letting go of sisters she dearly loved. Like a mother giving birth, she thought only of the needs of the poor and the sisters in the US, and not of her loss as her fingers traced a blessing on each of these 5 sisters before their journey. As they boarded the ship, these 5 sisters were embarking on an exciting adventure with heavy hearts. Sisters Barbara Hultenschmidt, Norberta Reinkober, Aurea Badziura, Brigitta Damhorst and Henrica Fassbender had departed Salzkotten having already said their goodbyes to families, friends, partners in ministry and loved ones. Sister Henrica had been

named by Mother Clara as the first Provincial of the new US Province. She and her sisters were eager to take up their responsibilities in the service of God's people. As Henrica wrote in her farewell poem to Mother Clara before leaving Salzkotten:

*For me beg the courage, the strength, and the power
That holy zeal for his honor within me may burn;
That humbly his glory I increase in each hour,
While striving his Holy Will to perform.*

Unfortunately, these 5 sisters never reached the United States. On the night of December 6, 1875 the Deutschland ran aground on the Kentish Knock in the English Channel, a sandbar off the coast of Harwich, England during a fierce snow storm that lasted throughout the night. Although some passengers managed to survive, many perished before rescuers could reach them with help. According to many accounts the Sisters gave up their places in the few lifeboats to women and children. They knew that they were being called to sacrifice their own safety for the good of others. Despite their fears, they lived up to their calling to love with steadfast love. Although they never reached our shores, we the sisters of the US Province have always claimed these 5 sisters as our own. We are convinced that their willing sacrifice and death for the good of others has brought untold blessings to our province. 5 grains of wheat fell into the turbulent sea that day and their death brought forth abundant life over these past 143 years. As we heard in the second reading such happenings "are mysteries of the providence of God which lead us according to God's will even though we do not understand it." These 5 sisters lived love to the fullest, laying down their lives so that others might live. S Henrica speaks to us now as she once spoke, as if by premonition, through her farewell poem to Mother Clara as she left Salzkotten:

*Farewell! Farewell! For I must now depart,
Yet will remain in spirit ever close to you!
Enclosed forever within Jesus' Sacred Heart,
Your joys and sorrows will be mine too!*

*Farewell! Also to you, my Sisters fond—
Ever preserve in your hearts your love for me!
Thus, uniting more firmly the consecrated bond
That binds our hearts for all eternity.*

When rescuers finally reached the stricken ship the next day, they were able to recover the bodies of 4 of the sisters. The body of Henrica Fassbender was never found. They were taken by train from Harwich to St Francis Parish Church in Stratford, just outside London, where thousands gathered to honor these sisters, even though they did not know their names. The long trip from the coast was undertaken because all that was known about them was that they were Catholic Sisters and Franciscans, and this was the nearest Catholic Franciscan Parish. They were finally laid to rest in nearby St Patrick Cemetery in a grave donated by a community of Franciscan Sisters. When a group of us visited that cemetery after our General Chapter of 2003, we prayed at their gravesite and spent some time in silence there. I decided to take a look at the graves of the sisters who had donated the space for their burial. Suddenly, I knew why this was meant to be their place of final rest—the name of the congregation was “Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary”. These “Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary” and daughters of Mother Clara were home. All five names mark the grave and all are remembered for their love, courage, sacrifice and surrender to God. Their witness to these gospel values, as recounted in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland”, continue to inspire people around the world. Their gift of life given continues to touch the hearts of all of us, their sisters, over the past 143 years.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value...” “I am confident of this, that the one who began this good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians)