

Mother Corona Wirfs, OSF: A Builder of Catholic Presence

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Men and women — lay, religious, and clerical — have toiled together over the past 175 years to advance the Catholic presence in Wisconsin. Our archdiocesan seminary and religious orders of men have provided “laborers in the vineyard,” building and staffing churches, schools, and places of social provision. Just as important has been the role of women religious.

Milwaukee is home to the motherhouses (central headquarters) of a number of congregations of women. They staffed the hospitals, orphanages, elementary and high schools, and colleges of Milwaukee. Some of them have left a significant impression on the local church.

The highly respected and loved Sister Camille Kliebhan, OSF, was the long-time president of Cardinal Stritch University. The late Sister Joel Read, SSSF, moved Alverno College into a new and dynamic phase of its existence. The Agnesian Sisters of Fond du Lac built a hospital and staffed schools throughout the diocese. Mother Caroline Friess of the School Sisters of Notre Dame was a powerful figure in early Milwaukee Catholic life. Salvatorian Sister Walburga Sieghart nursed the city’s sick. Mother Romana Thom of the Racine Dominicans sent sisters to work with African American youth. Various other communities of women all left their mark on archdiocesan history.

Years ago, when I was a new teacher at St. Joseph High School in Kenosha, I met the School Sisters of St. Francis. As I marveled at the beautiful lobby, the wonderful stage, and the little theater of this school, I was informed that the sisters, who have a deep commitment to musical education, had added these rooms to the building during the



▲ Mother Corona Wirfs was instrumental in spreading Catholic presence in the Milwaukee area during the 20th century. (Courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis Archives)

planning and made a rather substantial contribution of money and services to get the new school off the ground.

Mother Corona Wirfs had insisted on these additions to the original plan for the high school. I found a picture of her — a cherubic looking sister who reminded me of the mother superior in *The Sound of Music*. She appeared to be ordered up from central casting to be

the Mother General of the School Sisters from 1942-60.

As I studied her life and the careers of other Mothers General of this era, I was struck by the scope of their authority, the breadth of their responsibilities, and their ability to “move mountains” to do some wonderful things for the Church, both here in Milwaukee and elsewhere. Margaret Susan Thompson, a historian

of religious women in the United States, could have been speaking of Mother Corona when she notes of Catholic sisters “[their] tremendous authority and autonomy from men — more perhaps ... than virtually all their female counterparts.”

Mother Corona was born Catherine Wirfs on June 1, 1886, in Chicago. She was the first child of Anthony Wirfs and Ursula Grassi. Ursula, a German immigrant, bore two more children, a son and another daughter, but tragically died from complications of labor in 1892. Anthony sent the three children to live with his sister Agatha and her husband in Chicago. Catherine’s father moved around the country from job to job, keeping in touch with his children by letter. He died tragically in a railway accident in 1921.

Catherine entered the School Sisters of St. Francis in December 1904 at the age of 18 and received the religious name “Mary Corona.” She was orderly, systematic and had a keen intelligence. She taught briefly at St. Matthias School in Chicago and then was transferred to St. Philomena School in that city. During her years there, she served as principal while the parish was in the midst of a huge expansion of its school and the erection of a beautiful new church. She professed her first vows in July 1909 and her final vows in July 1913.

In 1925, she was called back to the Motherhouse in Milwaukee, where she became a general councilor to Mother Stanislaus Hegner. Stanislaus gave her a wide scope of duties, including a 1937 visitation to Japan and China to inspect the activities of the sisters’ mission in Tsingtao. In 1949, as Mother General, she was compelled to withdraw those sisters in the wake of the Chinese Revolution.

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In 1942, with Mother Stanislaus's energies failing, the Franciscan Chapter elected Corona as Stanislaus' successor. Corona inherited a large and growing community. After the war, the number of aspirants, postulants and novices exploded. By 1960, there were more than 4,000 School Sisters of St. Francis. Mother Corona was responsible for welcoming, training and placing this vast army of sisters. Although aided by counselors, she was a one-woman human resources department. Managing financial affairs, accepting new apostolates, engaging school superintendents and pastors on questions of salaries, negotiating with businessmen and bishops, and traveling to see the far-flung apostolates of the sisters were on her agenda.

Her letters to her sisters give a partial

view into her world. She was concerned with the spiritual life and the quality of human relationships among the sisters. She frequently admonished them to speak kindly of each other and maintain cordial relations with school parents and pastors. She always urged them to get enough sleep, to eat well and to "use common sense" when it came to disciplines like fasting. She was deferential to the sometimes demanding chaplain of the Motherhouse, Fr. Adolph Klink.

A 1958 letter Mother Corona wrote to the chancery in Omaha gives us a resume of the extensive reach of the School Sisters of St. Francis and matters that required her attention. "The Sisters teach in 182 parochial elementary schools and one private school — Alverno College Elementary School, with a total enrollment of 57,211 pupils, 28 high schools with an enrollment of 6,181 and

one college of 789 students. The schools are located in 13 states, or 25 dioceses and archdioceses. These sisters minister to the sick in four institutions located in the state of Wisconsin and one located in Honduras." She listed the health care apostolates: Sacred Heart Sanitarium, St. Mary's Hill Hospital, St. Joseph's in Beaver Dam, and Waupun Memorial Hospital in Waupun. She noted as well, "The Congregation owns and operates two central high schools for girls in Illinois ... engages in home and foreign mission work among the Indians and Negroes [sic] ... In Central America, the Sisters conduct three homes for orphan and neglected children and operate a general hospital in the Republic of Honduras."

Mother Corona stepped down from her duties in 1960 and died in 1964.

I remember chaperoning dances,

participating in ring-ceremonies, and being on hand for opening days in that beautiful lobby at St. Joseph's. On that stage were the excellent dramatic productions of the students, the Miss Kenosha Pageant — and even one of my first Masses as a newly ordained priest. Mother Corona and her co-workers left an important thumbprint on Catholic life here in the archdiocese and around the country.

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