

## Rome, Italy

*Called and Sent: A Charism of Service*,  
School Sisters of Notre Dame. History of the St. Louis Province, 1858 – 1958.  
Therese Mary Rebstock, SSND, 2006.

Communications from Switzerland arrived, too, as Mother Evangelista reported on her travels to Italy. Since her arrival in Pedemonte in February 1948, she had begun the search for a house in Rome. As the American branch of the order would supply the money for this establishment, information on progress was funneled to Munich and Milwaukee, and on to the provinces.<sup>1</sup>

Mother Evangelista was acquainted with the Superior General of the Marianist Fathers, Father Sylvester Juergens, S.M. The memory of his highly complimentary letter on the occasion of the centenary celebration just the year before gave her that extra confidence to call on him for help. Fortunately, he was in Rome during one of her visits there. His tutoring in negotiating techniques in Italy and the technical experience of Brother Bernard Shad helped her in assessing the condition of various houses. These gentlemen guided the sisters as they came to make a decision. Just a few days prior to her death on November 23, 1949, Mother Fidelis gave permission to proceed with a purchase.<sup>2</sup>

Mother Evangelista and Sister Bettina Schaidl, an assistant in the Generalate in Munich, traveled to Rome to finalize arrangements for the purchase. Father Juergens and several of his community had been on hand to help them sort through the maze of permits needed to have property lines verified and the house converted to convent use, permissions from the Cardinal Vicar to establish a community in Rome, and arrangements for the transfer and exchange of money. One by one the details were taken care of, the contract drawn up and agreed upon by all concerned in the transaction. On January 10, 1950, the beginning of the Holy Year, the final papers were signed and Monte Verde Nuovo became the first SSND house in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Letters from Mother Evangelista, St. Louis Province archives, St. Louis, Missouri. Mother Almeda had assigned Sister Reinhard Zoll from the United States to Pedemonte prior to the outbreak of World War II to look out for the property there. Sister Reinharda was able to travel freely on her American passport, and she carried out specific commissions for the Generalate. Sister Reinharda died March 2, 1941. Though the European countries were recovering from effects of the war, Mother Evangelista's American citizenship gave her similar freedom of travel. Cf., School Sister of Notre Dame, *Linked Lives* (Milwaukee: Notre Dame Convent Press, 1944), 76-86

<sup>2</sup> Mother Evangela was in Milwaukee on November 16, 1949. Though Mother Fidelis was gravely ill, she listened in turn to each provincial as she saw her. One topic discussed was the proposed convent in Rome. Though the first response to the purchase of the house found was negative, the decision was reversed and an affirmative reply was forwarded to Europe. The final decision rested on the willingness of the American provinces to finance the purchase. An account of this purchase is contained in letters written by Mother Evangelista.

The American Commissariat, with help from the five provinces, had assumed the financial responsibility for the foundation. The matter of personnel was placed firmly in the hands of the St. Louis Province. Mother Evangelista informed Mother Evangela in St. Louis, who called a meeting of the Chapter Sisters to discuss the new project that had come their way. The response was favorable, and unanimous.

On February 3, 1950, three St. Louisans arrived in Rome, the first community of the new home. Sister Lelia Pond, former French instructor at Le Clerc College and Notre Dame Junior College, was serving on the faculty of Mount Mary College in Milwaukee when she received word of her new assignment. Sister Cosma Vettese, an Italian from DuQuoin, was eager to rediscover her childhood language. Sister Omer Obermark felt she was up to the task of Roman-style shopping and bartering. She knew Sister Dorine Amann had departed for Kyoto, Japan, just a few months earlier, and she took courage from her, who, like herself, was willing to find out whether housekeeping had a universal language. The fourth member of the community was Sister Paraclita Baroli, a linguist from Gorizia, Italy, who had come to Rome earlier to assist in getting the house ready.

At first the sisters acclimated themselves to life in Rome as they mulled over disposition of the thirty-one rooms in the villa. Since other religious communities had houses in the general neighborhood, the SSNDs would have to find a different service to offer than those already being provided. As they found furnishings for the house and followed the events of the Holy Year just getting started, the sisters found ministering to American pilgrims solved the immediate problem of gainful employment. Hospitality became the first activity offered by the new mission at Monte Verde Nuovo.

Eventually classes were offered in French, German, and English. Language study became the sisters' basic service to people from all parts of Rome during the thirty-eight years the house was open. By 1952, two years after caring for Holy Year Pilgrims, the original community had welcomed Sister Julia Hale, an American from the Mankato Province; Sister Nantorine Schmid, a German sister relocated in Milwaukee; and Sister Celeste, Hungarian by birth and French by citizenship. Many sisters came to take part in the life of the Cultural Center, the first truly international house of the congregation, but Sister Cosma was the stabilizing element.<sup>3</sup> Except for periodic visits to the United States, Sister Cosma remained there until her death in January 1987, only months before the mission was closed.

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<sup>3</sup>“ Notre Dame Goes to Rome,” Inter-Provincial News Letter, February 1952. The inclusion of this information was to indicate the community of the first house in Rome was multicultural and foreshadowed the international community that would staff the Generalate from its beginning in Rome in 1957.

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