



School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Atlantic-Midwest Province

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Sister M. Alphonsine Gugger, SSND**  
**May 9, 1920 – June 16, 2018**



**Wilton, Conn.** - Sister M. Alphonsine Gugger, 98, died peacefully on June 16, 2018 at Lourdes Health Care Center in Villa Notre Dame. She was a vowed member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame for 69 years. Among her ministries, Sister Alphonsine began a primary school and parish ministry that spanned 53 years. She received the Jubilee Medal *Pro Meritus* from the Archdiocese of Newark for her dedicated service to the Archdiocese.

Maria Clara Gugger was born a twin on May 9, 1920, in the town of Widnau, in the Canton of St. Gallen, in Switzerland. She was baptized the next day in St. Jacobus parish church, the day her twin Pauline died. She had one older sister Martina, and the family later welcomed another girl Marie, and four brothers, Joseph, Otto, Charles and Eugene, who also died as a baby.

In her autobiography, Maria Clara wrote:

*Surrounded by the great mountains of the Alps with their high snow crystal peaks all through the year, stood the home of my mother Aloisia Frei and my father, Joseph Gugger. . . . in this valley of nature's richest beauties dwelt all our grandmothers, grandfathers, relatives and friends, strictly living Catholics and great lovers of all the liturgical ceremonies in all the events of the Church year.*

When she was in first grade in the school in Widnau, her father decided to visit his sisters in New York and New Jersey. Her mother was left with responsibility for their large

property and farm, as well as the children. He found the new experiences of America so favorable that he wished to settle there. In November 1927, the family landed in New York Harbor.

Sensitively, Maria Clara wrote:

*One cannot imagine what a costly sacrifice this detachment meant for my mother, who had both mother and father still living, plus her sisters and brothers. My father left only his mother and sister.*

She also said, “We [children] were overjoyed to think that we were about to cross the big Atlantic Ocean.”

When the family arrived, Joseph Gugger was already employed on the farm at the Redemptorist Fathers Seminary, Mount St. Alphonsus, in Esopus, N.Y. A house on the property became the family home. Sisters of St. Elizabeth also lived on the property and cared for the seminarians. In January 1928, Martina, Maria Clara and Marie began first grade at the public school in Esopus. They knew no English, so the first few years were very hard. At the parish church, Sacred Heart, they received First Communion in May 1928, and were confirmed in May 1930, in the seminary chapel.

In November 1931, Clara and two of her brothers witnessed Marie’s death when she was hit by a car while they were crossing Lincoln Highway after school. Clara called this “a great disaster.”

After her graduation in June 1935, the Fathers made it possible for Clara to attend the only Catholic high school in that area, the Academy of St. Ursula, in Kingston. She was taught by the Sisters of St. Ursula of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As a sophomore, an appendicitis operation in a hospital run by Benedictine Sisters acquainted her with a third group of Sisters. “I did not yet know where God wished me to go to answer His call, which I had heard so distinctly since my arrival in America,” she wrote later.

In June 1939, after graduation from St. Ursula’s, Clara began courses in Education at Fordham University. She was greatly puzzled about what would be best for her and “God’s own choice.” She wrote that, “Finally, one of the Redemptorist Fathers began to tell me of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.” Immediately she was

*...intensely interested, and in spite of the fact that I never*

*met any SSNDs before my introduction to their spirit and life, I immediately saw clearly that this community possessed everything that I could desire and which I did not find as a whole in any of the other orders.*

On December 8, 1947, Clara received the bonnet at the Motherhouse on Aisquith Street in Baltimore. She attended the Teacher Training School, and was received as a novice with the name Mary Alphonsine on July 16, 1948. First and Final Vows followed on August 3, 1949, and August 3, 1955. In 1957, she was awarded a Bachelor's Degree in Education from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

After her first commitment, Sister Alphonsine began a primary school and parish ministry that spanned 53 years. Her missions were St. Ambrose in Baltimore; St. Vincent Orphanage in Tacony, Pennsylvania; St Boniface in Philadelphia; and finally St. John Evangelist in Bergenfield, N. J., where she spent 26 years. She taught primary grades until 1988, and then served as school librarian and media specialist, parish sacristan and pastoral minister until 2002. "One of the things I learned to do because of my Swiss heritage was to yodel, and I'd do that to entertain [my little ones] and others."

In December 1998, Alphonsine and Sister Henry Gadsby received the Jubilee Medal *Pro Meritus* from the Archdiocese of Newark. They were recommended by their pastor for dedicated service to the Archdiocese; the medals were presented by Archbishop Theodore McCarrick at a ceremony at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

With the closing of the Bergenfield Convent in 2002, Alphonsine came to Villa Notre Dame and took charge of the LeClerc dining room, where she cheerfully offered "hospitality and refreshment" to guests and anyone who came in. Her friend, Sister Celine Marie Flynn, fondly attested to her kindness and conversational abilities when she spoke at "Alfie's" wake.

Many very devoted nieces and nephews and other family members were present at her death and at the Christian wake service on June 20 at Villa Notre Dame. They brought beautiful, large photographs of her as a child, candidate, professed sister in the original habit, and another in the modified habit-- a veritable pictorial history of a quintessential SSND life well-lived. The Mass of Christian Burial on June 21 was presided over by Villa Chaplain Thomas Elliott, CSC. Burial followed at St. Mary Cemetery, Bethel, Connecticut.

Memorial contributions may be made to the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Atlantic Midwest Province, c/o Development Office, 345 Belden Hill Road, Wilton, Conn. 06897 or online: [www.amssnd.org](http://www.amssnd.org)