

Mother Frances Streit

FOUNDRESS OF THE SISTERS
OF THE SORROWFUL MOTHER



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We, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, wish to share with you the gift that God gave us and the Church through Mother Frances Streitl, our foundress.

Often, we are asked who our foundress is, what she did, when she lived, what our charism is... For this reason, we present this pamphlet so that you can easily learn the story of Mother Frances and the special charism that the Holy Spirit gave her.

Together we would like to look back over the main stages of her life in order to become absorbed in her deep experience of God, which led her on roads that were not always easy. The greatness of this woman is chiefly found in her faith, which constantly guided her in the pursuit of God's will and presence. She was like the bride in the Song of Songs who cannot find peace until she finds her beloved. Mother Frances' person and deeds can be summed up with these words; *"May the best rest be that in which the performance of duty and accomplishment of the holy Will of God please me"*.¹

Let us begin our walk in her footsteps...

A BEGINNING LIKE MANY OTHERS



On November 24, 1844, Adam and Franziska Hörhammer Streitel rejoiced at the birth of their first-born daughter Amalia. She was born in Mellrichstadt, Germany, a picturesque town lying in the foothills of the Rhon Mountains and the Thuringian forest. According to the custom of her time, she was baptized on the day of her birth in her parents' home and named *Amalia Frances Rose*.

Her parents, who lived a life based on the strong principles of the Catholic faith, had three other children:



Adam, Hermann, and Hedwig. The Streitel family manifested their sincere love of God and neighbor through their loving concern for the poor, the sick and the needy. Together they made their home an ideal Catholic family where daily prayer, attendance at

Mass, and celebration of the feasts of the Church, especially those of the Blessed Virgin Mary, were of fundamental importance.



HER CHILDHOOD

Although of a willful disposition and lively temperament, Amalia soon learned self-control and self-discipline through the guidance of her mother, who demanded obedience, punctuality, and orderliness in daily living. At an early age, she was taught to perform household tasks and to become skillful in needlework. She was also carefully trained in the manner of polite society suited to the rank and social position of her family. Social obligations often kept her from living a life of solitude, which was her desire.



A HEART FOR GOD



Amalia's religious formation began at an early age. When she was two, she was taught by her mother to make the Sign of the Cross and say little prayers. She was noted not merely for her intelligence, but also for her love for the poorer children around her, thus growing in a deep and true love for God. This soon brought her to an awareness of being called to religious life.



At the age of nine, she sought to understand the meaning of Christ's words, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself."²

The reception of her First Holy Communion, on April 19, 1857, made her bond with God even stronger.

Another very important aspect of her human and Christian formation was her devotion to the Virgin Mary, fostered by her family and by the presence in her hometown of several shrines dedicated to Mary as Mother of Sorrows.



HER YOUTH:

A TIME FOR SAYING "YES"

After completing her elementary education, Amalia was sent to Augsburg, Germany, to the Franciscan Institute known as *Maria Stern* where she obtained a diploma in French and music.



On September 24, 1857, she received the Sacrament of Confirmation, which confirmed in her an intuition of being called to the religious life. The manner in which the call to religious life came to Amalia is not known. She herself tells us it came to her in a special manner when she reached the age of seventeen. Her notebook merely records: "August 1862, call to convent."

Her parents strongly opposed her decision to enter religious life. They desired her to marry. This painful situation came to a climax after four years of endurance when, hiding among the rafters in the attic of her home, she refused to be introduced to a law student as a possible suitor for her hand. In this way, Amalia showed her intent to answer God's call with a life devoted to Him alone.

HER WISH COMES TRUE



On September 25, 1866, Amalia finally entered religious life at the Franciscan Institute of *Maria Stern* where she was educated in her youth. Her parents had given their consent, provided it was not a convent of strict enclosure nor one engaged in the care of the sick. Amalia immediately told the Superior of her desire to care for the sick. Instead of being granted this preference, she was asked to continue her study of French and music.



She entered the novitiate on June 3, 1867, receiving the name of Sr. Angela, and made her religious profession of vows a year later.

Although her wish for a consecrated life had come true, she was still struggling because she desired a stricter and more rigorous religious discipline. She also found herself, in the name of obedience, being asked to teach and, later on, being appointed superior. After a period of time, Sr. Angela herself realized that she needed to relinquish her initial zeal and began to live an easier, less ascetical way of life. A serious illness that demanded a great sacrifice of sleeping for five weeks on a mattress of seaweed gave her insight



into her interior life. This resulted in her conversion. From this very moment, she fought a fierce battle with her self-love.

What she really wished for was to practice poverty like St. Francis of Assisi. This brought her to wish for a renewal, not only in the religious life, but also in the Church and in society. Therefore, she embraced every opportunity to give up all nonessentials. She devoted herself to carry out

the tasks assigned to her, leading a profound prayer life and constantly being under God's loving gaze. With this grew the urge to live according to the original austerity of the Franciscan rule. She strongly perceived a call to live St. Francis' vision: material and spiritual poverty, and love of the Crucified One within the Church and the entire world.



THE CARMELITE CONVENT



As a fruit of her prayer life, Sr. Angela clearly became aware that she wanted to have a deeper spiritual union with God. Prayer was by then her only strength. Through prayer, she understood that God was calling her into a new experience. Therefore, she asked to leave the Institute of *Maria Stern* and enter the Carmelite convent of *Himmelsporten* in Germany. This

decision to leave *Maria Stern* and enter the Carmelite convent on January 25, 1882, was made amidst an indescribable interior struggle.

Soon after her entrance into the Carmelite convent, she received the habit of a novice and the name of "Sr. Petra." At Carmel, she began a new phase of her life: the Lord granted her the grace to start walking again towards Him.

In one of her letters, she wrote: "*I had found in Carmel through prayer and sacrifice what I had sought for years. I had a novitiate. I could be obedient. Often I had occasion to divest myself of the ten years' superiorship. I became childlike again and came closer to the God of my heart.*"⁵

Sr. Petra once again gave her all to God; yet, she soon found herself in an inner desert where God's voice is clearer to one's heart.



A NEW CALL:

Activity and Contemplation: A Single Way

At Carmel, absorbed in prayer and silence, Sr. Petra came to understand that God was not calling her to a cloistered life but to unite the active with the contemplative life in a new foundation. This special interior experience caused her to leave the Carmelite convent and be available for a new task from God. Here is what she wrote about her call to realizing a charism that would unite the active life with the contemplative:

"I was praying in the choir in the forenoon and saw something, to me hitherto strange. In spirit I beheld two mountains rise. These two mountains stood in line with each other. The mountain rising on the right was higher than the other and had some sort





of gradations. On its summit, I believe I saw St. Elijah in rather indistinct form; farther down I also saw St. Teresa. The other mountain was not so high, probably because it was not so old. In the one I recognized Carmel; in the other, Alverno, on which St. Francis was standing with a cross in his hand. Both mountains arched themselves into one, the higher mountain arching and inclining



toward the other from about the place where St. Teresa stood... The call which I received before or after this vision, and which came to me because I would not comprehend why the Lord wished to lead me out of Carmel again, sounded like this: 'To unite the active life with the contemplative.' Perhaps this will shed light on what I saw. Carmel may represent prayer, Alverno, activity. Both prayer and work have received new sprouts in the course of centuries, which have frequently misrepresented the sublimity of the one and the necessity of the other. In the one Order one often fails to understand the prayer of work; in the other, the work of prayer. Prayer and work must go hand in hand and like twin sisters, strive to remedy the spiritual and social misery of humankind, teaching it again what it means to pray and work."⁴

*"By Faith Abraham went out to a place,
not knowing where he was to go"* (HEB 11)



God showed Sr. Petra His will once again when Father Francis Jordan asked her to cooperate with him in the establishment of the female branch of his new foundation whose goal was Christian education. Just like Abraham, by faith and obedience to God's will, she left for Rome without knowing exactly what she was going to do. As the Virgin Mary said yes to the Angel, so did she, not knowing where this would lead her.

On February 16, 1883, Sr. Petra arrived in Rome. The dwelling offered by Father Jordan was truly simple, an apartment with very few utensils for the kitchen, without beds or chairs, but with the advantage of being near the basilica of St. Peter. Great

was her joy because also exteriorly she could express her love for poverty and for the Church.





The new name which she chose: Sr. Mary Frances of the Cross, was indicative of her mission.

For two years, Sr. M. Frances and Fr. Jordan sought to cooperate with each other in spite of difficulties and misunderstandings that arose from being faithful to two different charisms. For this reason, separation became inevitable. The ecclesiastical authority separated the institute led by Sr. M. Frances from the one led by Fr. Jordan (Society of the Divine Savior, also known as Salvatorians).

THE SISTERS OF THE SORROWFUL MOTHER



of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi

The *Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother* was thus formed with Sr. M. Frances as its foundress and first superior. From here on she is referred to as *Mother Frances*. The new community scrupulously followed the Franciscan Rule with special attention to poverty and sharing with the poor. In order to provide a living, the sisters devoted themselves to the most menial of works, such as tending the sick in their homes and taking care of the sacristy at the church of Camposanto Teutonico in the Vatican. The sisters lived as poor people among the poor, adhering to the contemplation of Christ with Mary at the foot of the Cross. The Sacraments and

the Liturgy of the Hours were their nourishment. They did all they could so that the people they met could see God through their smiles, their words of hope, and their hugs.



The community was growing and this increase in membership necessitated first of all a new means for subsistence. The sisters were, therefore, allowed to collect alms. Some sisters left for Germany, Austria, France, and Poland. Others left for the United States arriving in Kansas in 1888 to solicit alms, but they found such poverty, both spiritual and material, that, upon request of the local ecclesiastical authority, they stayed to take care of the sick and the poor. They had gone to receive, but stayed to give.

Faithful to her vocation, Mother Frances accepted everything from the hands of God, even when she later experienced pain and the Cross when she was removed from the office of general superior because of some misunderstandings. Supported by the certainty that *everything is good because God permits it*, she lived the last years of her life in Castel Sant'Elia, province of Viterbo, Italy, serving the children at the kindergarten, taking care of the sick, and doing her best with a maternal heart for "her" sisters.

After a long agony, she died on March 6, 1911.

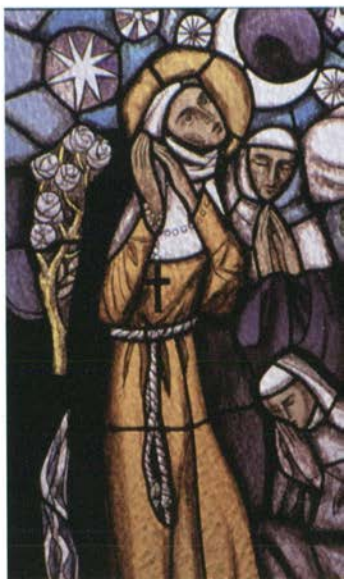
On the same day, Pope Pius X approved the Constitutions of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis, thus recognizing the gift of the Spirit given to Mother Frances in founding our congregation. She walked this path toward sanctity and so do we, hoping that others will do the same.

IN THE HEART OF MOTHER FRANCES



Mother Frances found nourishment in the writings of the Franciscan and Carmelite spirituality, especially of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, and St. Teresa of Avila. She was strongly attracted to the way these three saints loved the humanity and the passion of Christ, as well as their capability to live it.

From Mother Frances' "Yes" springs our community, the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother. We are all aware that God's gift is enriched by the contribution of each of us and of those whom God will call to share Mother Frances' insight and charism. The gift that the Spirit gave to Mother Frances by calling her to found a new religious

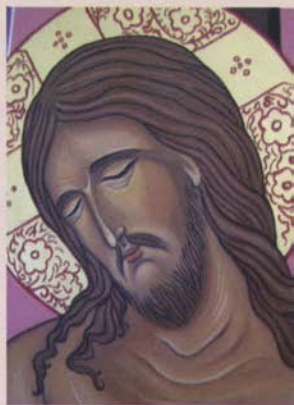


family can be summed up in a few salient points springing from the contemplation of the Crucified and of Mary at the foot of the Cross.

∞ *Love for Jesus' humanity
and the Eucharist*

These are the two cores that form the heart of the Franciscan and the Carmelite spirituality. The Incarnation and the Eucharist are the highest signs of God's love for us. The former is the free choice by God to share our human condition, the latter is the realization of His Word; "I am with you always, until the end of the ages."⁵

Mother Frances, especially toward the last years of her life in Castel Sant'Elia, spent a great deal of time in prayer. It was her adoration of the Blessed Sacrament that expressed her love for Jesus' humanity and her desire to conform herself to Him;



"Lord, I desire nothing but You, but You I desire to possess entirely."⁶

According to Mother Frances, the Christmas crib and the Cross are to be presented again, in all their spiritual richness, to humanity of this time for they are a clear sign of the unequivocal love with which God loved us and gave Himself to us.

∞ *Mary at the foot of the Cross*

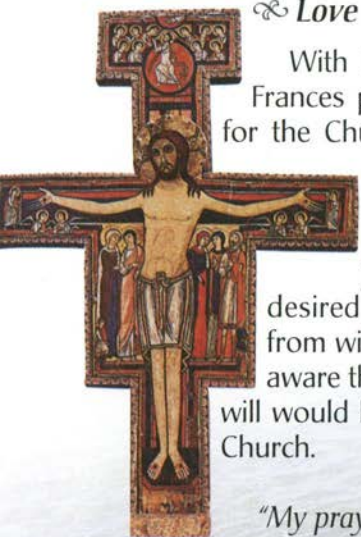
It was Mary at the foot of the Cross that Mother Frances and the sisters looked up to and who was their guide and model in their daily lives. Mother Frances' heart was touched by Mary's readiness and docility to God's will:

"To take root in Mary Immaculate and to be formed in her according to the designs of God; to be introduced by her into the mystery of love and suffering that I may become in truth a bride of the Crucified, one who will never abandon Christ's blood-stained feet until Love Crucified shall say: "Come up higher; take your place in the center of My Heart."⁷



If we compare our capability of carrying out God's will with our limitations, they seem to be insurmountable. Nevertheless, the Sorrowful Mother teaches us to be steadfast with no conditions or uncertainties.

∞ *Love for the Church*



With Franciscan spirit, Mother Frances passed on to us her love for the Church. Although she knew that the Church of her time was facing a difficult situation, she was never judgmental but always desired a renewal that began from within. Mother Frances was aware that what she saw as God's will would be of benefit to the entire Church.

"My prayer today at the true crib of the Savior, the high altar of holy poverty, was as follows: Lord, bring honor to Your Church. Grant that her bridal gown appear in the brilliance of new colors, the colors of humility and poverty. Awaken for Yourself children who have the courage to follow You in despising the world and in practicing strict renunciation, who become little in order to appear great before You."^{1/8}

∞ *Love of poverty*

Love of poverty is one of the foundations in Mother Frances' life; she considered it the mother of all virtues. Mother Frances and the first sisters chose and lived material poverty with great fidelity. At the same time, they took to heart the material and spiritual poverty of many people. It is poverty that allows us to have a heart free for God.

"Oh, may the Lord speak to you in audible signs of the joy which will be prepared for Him if a new, a poor generation arises for Him, if the original religious spirit is awakened again in souls and the world must realize that true peace does not consist in full possession of earthly goods, but in the renunciation of them."⁹





WE, SISTERS OF THE SORROWFUL MOTHER, TODAY

In the footsteps of Mother Frances, we look to Mary at the foot of the Cross as a model of faith and discipleship, and we live the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. We try to practice Mother Frances' ideal in contemplating God's mystery according to which one seeks union with the Lord through constant prayer and a vigilant ministry for the Church and for those who are in material and spiritual need.





Aware that many people, thanks to Mother Frances and her sisters, have the chance to have a better, more human existence as well as a life in accordance with the Word of God, we also seek to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ.

At this writing, we have sisters in Austria, the Caribbean Islands of: Grenada, Dominican Republic, St. Lucia, Trinidad; Brazil, Germany, Italy





and the United States of America. We serve in education, health care, and evangelization, announcing that God is the Lord of the living. In July 2006 a small group of sisters was missioned in the Diocese of Kahama, Tanzania, Africa.

Through a life devoted to apostolic ministry and supported by a contemplative spirit, we care for the needy, especially the poor. With all our limitations, we seek God above all things.

1 *Letters to her Parents and her sister Hedwig*, Letter 19 (18), #5;

Letters of Mother Frances Streitl to Reverend Joseph Joch, Letter 28 (17), #2

2 John 12, 32

3 *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan*, Letter 28 (17), #6

4 *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan*, Letter 39 (86), #8

5 Matthew 28:20

6 *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan*, Letter 62 (43), #3

7 M. Frances' Personal Notebook, December 15, 1896

8 *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan*, Letter 75 (52), #2

9 *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan*, Letter 75 (52), #2



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B.P. 94 – 67038 Strasbourg – France

Tel: (0033) (0) 3 88 78 91 91

Fax: (0033) (0) 3 88 78 91 99

Email: info@editionsdusigne.fr

www.editionsdusigne.fr

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SUORE DELLA SS.MA MADRE ADDOLORATA

Casa Generalizia
Via Paolo III, 9
00165 Roma, Italia

REGIÃO BRASIL

CONVENTO MÃE DOLOROSA
Estrada Velha de Anápolis, km 06
Caixa postal 557
74001-970 Goiânia, GO
Brasil

REGION DEUTSCHLAND

Marienburg 5
D – 91183 Abenberg
Deutschland

REGIONE ITALIA

Via Longobucco, 19
00178 Capannelle, Roma
Italia

REGION ÖSTERREICH

Simmeringer Hauptstraße, 175
A – 1110 Wien
Österreich

US/CARIBBEAN PROVINCE

17600 E. 51st Street
Broken Arrow, OK 74012-9231