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Sister Justina Segale, S.C. and the Work of the Santa Maria Settlement House

JUDITH METZ, S.C., PH.D.
August 1897 — “Sister,” said Mother Mary Blanche one day, “I’ve been wondering if you and Sister Blandina could do anything for the poor Italians of the city? [W]hen I saw you both kneeling in the chapel in front of me, it occurred to me that you could do a great deal for them.”

“Well, Mother,” I said, “I have often thought of the same thing and sister and I would gladly undertake anything on their behalf.”

“Well,” said Mother, “Go, see the Most Rev. Archbishop and ask what he thinks about it.”

This excerpt from the opening pages of the Santa Maria Journals goes on to relate how Sisters Justina and Blandina Segale, siblings and members of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, visited Cincinnati Archbishop Henry Elder, secured his blessing and promise of financial support, and made plans to begin what was to become the “Santa Maria Italian Educational and Industrial Home.”

This approach to starting a new work was fairly routine for women religious attempting to meet the needs of their time. They, or their bishop or pastor, would encounter a needy individual or population and immediately try to respond in whatever way they could. Typically, these women encountered many obstacles in pursuing their ministries. Crucial among these was a lack of resources. In the case here of Sisters Justina and Blandina, they were given five dollars for carfare and told to ‘see what they could do.’ Another obstacle, though, was opposition, sometimes from unforeseen sources. Just a month after beginning their work, Sister Justina relates, “As soon as we spoke of securing a place and asked permission to solicit donations, the opposition began, first from members of the [Sister of Charity] Community itself who feared to involve the Community in debt, secondly from persons influential who do not see the necessity of this new work. Then other difficulties began to appear.”

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1 Santa Maria Journals, J-1, 22 August 1897, Santa Maria Institute Papers, Sisters of Charity Archives, Mount Saint Joseph, Ohio (Hereafter cited as SMI Papers).

2 J-1, 23 September 1897, Ibid.
But these sisters were accustomed to hard times and obstacles and were prepared to take on challenges. Born in a small mountain village near Genoa, Italy, their father, Francesco Segale, was an illiterate peasant; their mother, Giovanna Casagrande, a foundling. Following dreams for a better future, they immigrated to the United States in 1854 with their five young children. Settling in Cincinnati, Ohio, where they joined others from their homeland, they experienced the extreme poverty and struggle of newly arrived immigrants. While their father began with a fruit stand which eventually grew into a produce store, their mother saw to the home and the education of the children. By the time both sisters Maria Maddalena, age 20 (Sister Justina), and Maria Rosa, age 16 (Sister Blandina), joined the Sisters of Charity in 1866, they had completed their studies. After their novitiate both were sent to teach. Although their early years as Sisters took them to differing locales, their close relationship endured and blossomed into the formation of a well-synchronized team during their thirty years together at Santa Maria.

Sister Justina spent her early years as a school teacher, including fifteen on frontier missions in Trinidad, Colorado, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Already fluent in English and Italian, she learned Spanish as well. During the 1890s, while working in Lansing, Michigan, she became interested in the welfare of blind students at Michigan State University. Learning braille so she could write prayers and religious instructions for them, she championed the introduction of Catholic braille books into the university library.

Meanwhile Sister Blandina, definitely the more colorful and outspoken of the two, spent more than twenty years on missions in Colorado and New Mexico. She recorded her adventures in letters and diaries which were eventually published as *At the End of the Santa*.

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5 Sister Justina Segale, Undated Obituary, Necrology File, Sisters of Charity Archives, Mount Saint Joseph, Ohio.
Her humorous, heartwarming, and hair-raising stories include personally tearing down and building new schools, encounters with Billy the Kid, begging trips to mining and railroad camps, and fighting for the rights of Native Americans.

The year 1897 saw these two creative and dynamic Sisters of Charity joining forces to “gladly undertake anything” on behalf of poor Italians in Cincinnati. Their experiences of facing hardships and dangers, as well as their deep spirituality and sense of mission, had prepared these women well for what they would meet in their new work. While they were Genoese (northern) Italians, the people to whom they were sent were Sicilians (southern Italians) whose dialect, manners, and customs differed greatly from their own. These newcomers were crowded into downtown tenements and struggling for survival. Many were cultural Catholics but gave little priority to religious practice in this new setting. They were willing to cooperate with anyone willing to assist them, and seeing an opportunity Methodists were engaged in a concerted effort to convert them by offering educational opportunities and social outreach. Sisters Justina and Blandina plunged into this setting with gusto.7

Sister Justina’s humorous, detailed, compassionate, tell-it-like-it-is recording of the day-to-day environment in which she and her co-workers carried out their work at Santa Maria reveals the motivation, scope, and meaning of the work for her. In the course of her twenty-one journals she reveals:

1. This is what we are doing;
2. This is why we are doing it;
3. We are convinced it needs to be done and we will get it done;
4. We will be persistent and tireless in getting it done.

This Is What We Are Doing

Almost a decade after the work at Santa Maria began, Sister Justina recorded a discussion about obtaining the endorsement of the Business Men’s Advisory Association. One of the gentlemen suggested there ought to be nothing of religion in the work if the public was to be asked support it. To this the intrepid nun asked, “What good could we do if the ultimate end is not to draw the soul to God?”8 This simple response is the key to understanding the tireless efforts and multifaceted works that poured forth from the sisters, social workers, and volunteers at Santa Maria. Sister Justina saw all Italians as belonging in and to the Catholic Church, and she frequently expressed righteous indignation that some had fallen away or been lured from their rightful inheritance as possessors of the “True Faith.”

Although the sisters’ initial thrust was working with Italian school children and

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8 J-2, 12 January 1907, SMI Papers.
families, no one was outside the spectrum of their concern. Within a short time of the founding of Santa Maria they were serving young people and adults: Hungarians, Syrians, Egyptians, immigrants and the poor of every age and description.

Their first efforts revolved around education. “The one unfailing remedy to prevent our children from going to Protestant proselytizing schools is to provide better ones for them, and thus preserve the true faith among the poor,” Sister Justina wrote.9

After establishing a school, they engaged in what could be described as a tug-of-war with their Protestant ‘adversaries’ to keep Catholic children in the Catholic parish school. Sister Justina expressed ongoing distress at the lack of instruction or knowledge the children had about their faith. Besides teaching religion in the parish school, the sister’s Sunday School classes concentrated on preparing children for their First Holy Communion. Immediately after they reached this important milestone, the sisters initiated the boys into the “Sacred Heart Society” and the girls into the “Children of Mary Society.” “I hope we may be able to keep these children together and good Catholics by means of their monthly Holy Communion,” remarked Sister Justina.10

Hoping to keep the children within their sphere and to assist them in their enculturation process, the sisters set up classes in music, drawing, sewing, English, citizenship, and washing and ironing. They started an adult night school and offered Holy Communion instruction for children beyond school age at their residence. Once they were able to purchase a facility to house their work, their activities expanded even more, for instance taking in homeless young women on a temporary basis.

Recruiting for their programs, the sisters spent a great deal of time visiting tenements in downtown Cincinnati. Thus, they became acutely aware of the poverty and social problems that many of these families endured. Seeing any assistance they could offer as an extension of their work, they expanded their works in a multitude of directions. Sister

9  J-1, 27 September 1897, Ibid.
10  J-1, 12 June 1898, Ibid.
Justina noted: “It is our intention to try to get places [jobs] for our school boys when they will be obliged to leave school, for being poor, the parents need the little they can gain for the support of the family.” The sisters also began making regular visits to hospitals, the workhouse, the House of Refuge, the Children’s Home, and to Juvenile Court.

In recounting a visit to one home, Sister Justina was distressed to find that the entire family was attending the neighborhood Episcopal church, even though they were all baptized Catholics. Though the mother was not home at the time, Sister left with the resolve that “we shall not give up till she and her family are back in the Church.” This dogged attitude toward keeping and winning Italians for the Catholic Church pervaded the sisters’ lives. On Thanksgiving Day, 1899, they unexpectedly received a statue of the Blessed Virgin. “The foot of our Blessed Mother crushes the serpent’s head,” Sister Justina observed, “May it be verified by the crushing of the heresy which the enemy is trying to implant in the hearts of the unsuspecting Italians, by the powerful aid of the ‘Santa Maria’ Help of Christians.”

This Is Why We Are Doing It

As young girls Sisters Justina and Blandina had seen Sisters of Charity working among the poor, the sick, and the orphaned. They were educated by these sisters, and when they became members of the community, they saw themselves as carriers of the vision of Saints Vincent de Paul and Elizabeth Seton. Sister Justina’s journals indicate an awareness of this heritage and are permeated with the founders’ spirituality.

“The Love of Christ Urges Us!” was their Sister of Charity motto. St. Vincent exhorted: “If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is its flame. Let us beg God to enkindle in our hearts a desire to serve him. Let us give ourselves to him to do whatever he pleases with us.” This spirit of selfless giving of time, energy, and resources is illustrated throughout Sister Justina’s recounting of her years of outreach rendered to the poor. Although recording comments such as “We gave up our community room and dormitory for school rooms,” or “this is a period of trial and discouragement,” she never complained of personal inconvenience or lack of energy.

Identifying with the suffering of Christ, accepting the will of God, and trusting in Divine Providence were also characteristics of the founders that Sister Justina incorporated into her spirituality. From the outset her outlook at Santa Maria is expressed thus: “if it is His work it will succeed despite opposition — if it is not His work, we do not want it to

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11 J-1, 31 January 1899, Ibid.
12 J-1, 18 March 1900, Ibid.
13 J-1, 3- November 1899, Ibid.
15 Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14.
17 J-1, 16 September 1900; and J-2, 16 May 1903, SMI Papers.
succeed. But it is manifestly His work so we do not fear though we have nothing to begin
with.” This sentiment is a clear echo of Elizabeth Seton’s prayer: “If I succeed, I bless God;
if I do not succeed, I bless God, for then it will be right that I should not succeed.” Notice
that Sister Justina goes on to assert firmly that this is God’s work! She continues in her
journal, “We found a penny on the street so that is the nucleus of the fund for the purchase
of a house. I have written our motto: ‘A penny and two sisters are nothing. A penny, two
sisters and God are omnipotent.”

A sampling of entries from the Santa Maria Journals offers a sense of the spirit with
which the two sisters approached their work:

- “Though we have privations and mortifications to bear, we are very happy, and
  very earnest in trying to do our duty. We prove that God sweetens everything that
  is done for Him.”
- “I am afraid we will not be able to do anything there without a special miracle of
  God’s grace.”
- “Our dear Lord has provided so far and I am sure He will provide for the future;
  we will leave it to Him, but we shall continue to do our best, still remembering that
  without Him we can do nothing.”
- “Mother Mary Florence writes us that all the Sisters are storming Heaven with
  their prayers to help us in this crisis. From the events of today we feel that our
  prayers are being heard.”

Facing with humor the hard reality of their beginnings, Sister Justina tells of “laugh[ing]
till the tears ran down our cheeks” at the undisciplined conduct of the children. But all
was carried out in a spirit of patience and trust. In a 1913 entry Sister Justina quotes a short
verse that captures her disposition:

Our days alternate
In grief and joy supernal,
But he who trusts in God
Finds peace and joy eternal.

The goal of loving and serving God while assisting others motivated Sister Justina and
her co-workers. “There is so much to do, and so slender means to do it,” she commented.
“If our confidence were not placed in God, feeling that it is His work, and that in His own
good time He will do what seems impossible, we might indeed be discouraged.”

But they persevered, buoyed by a sense of hope and the knowledge that they were living in the spirit of Charity exemplified by their forbearers.

**We Are Convinced That It Needs To Be Done and We Will Get It Done**

“Providence has been so visible in the establishment of the work that our confidence in Him is implicit,” Sister Justina asserted. This assured sense that God wanted this work done was augmented for her by the convergence she sensed in seeing the wishes of her Mother Superior and the Archbishop of Cincinnati come together.

The work of Santa Maria received strong support from the Sisters of Charity, starting with the fact that the sisters were permitted to work without compensation. Mother Mary Blanche Davis as well as superiors from other Sister of Charity missions regularly sent useful items to Santa Maria Sisters, and within a year of the center opening, additional sisters were missioned to expand the staff. The motherhouse sent furniture, bedding, prayer books, and other necessary materials as well as a steady stream of prayers intended for the success of their work.

Besides the enthusiastic endorsement of Archbishop Henry Elder, Santa Maria received support from a number of clergy. Rev. John Mackey, rector of the Cathedral, solicited benefactors for them, while other priests offered to teach and minister in various ways to the Italian immigrants. In October 1904, Sister Justina wrote: “The saintly Archbishop [Elder] has gone to his eternal rest and the Santa Maria loses its greatest friend.” But Archbishop Henry Moeller, Elder’s successor, continued to funnel available resources to them.

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Given this endorsement from their superiors, Sisters Justina and Blandina accepted their charge to carry on the work at Santa Maria in the most comprehensive manner possible. The need was clear and they believed in their own capabilities, but they did not plunge in without thought. From the onset they studied, planned, and consulted. Sister Justina reported meeting with a woman well-known for her connections to charitable institutions, who offered them “wise hints.” They spent their summer breaks preparing for the next year and “drawing out a plan for a ‘Model Settlement’ which Mrs. Hayward requested [them] to do.” In a separate instance, Sister Justina called on the Secretary of the American Federation of Catholic Societies “to ask his advice in adopting the best means to prevent proselytism among the Italians.” She also studied Italian in her spare time, explaining that working with the Italians “has, to a great extent, brought the language back to our minds, after over thirty years of disuse. The people whose children we taught are Sicilians and their dialect is very strange — almost impossible for us to understand, but now we are beginning to understand it a little.”

With strong conviction, ample backing, and a creative approach, the Santa Maria Institute, the first Catholic settlement house in the country, became the premier Catholic social service center in Cincinnati. It provided a multiplicity of programs initially in the downtown area, and later in several outlying neighborhoods where immigrants had settled.

We Will Be Persistent and Tireless in Getting It Done

The sisters employed several fronts in tackling their work. On the one hand they were fearless in confronting those who worked against them, particularly Protestant proselytizers. From their earliest efforts they engaged in a titanic struggle to enroll and keep Italian children in Catholic parish schools. “The Methodist Italian School has made great efforts to induce the children who have left their school to return to it,” Sister Justina reported. In fact, Methodist teachers visited the Italians, telling them the Catholic school was not recognized by the state and that the children would be arrested if they did not return to their Methodist school. This competition for students continued over a period of years, but the sisters never relented in their claims to Italian children.

They also opposed Protestant ministers who recruited Italian children to attend their churches, conducting a protracted battle with a Mr. and Mrs. Castellini. “Mr. Andriolo was one of the men who let his children go [to the Protestant church], “Sister Justina reported.

29 J-1, 9 April 1898, Ibid.
30 J-1, 30 June 1898; and 7 July 1898, Ibid.
31 J-2, 18 May 1903; and J-1, 8 July 1898, Ibid.
32 Fortin, Faith and Action, 237.
33 J-1, 30 March 1898, SMI Papers.
“We sent for him to reason with him on the wrong he was doing, he, a Catholic to send his children to learn Protestant catechism. We will have to continue to visit the people around and with God’s grace, the danger of Mr. and Mrs. Castellini’s proselytism will be lessened.”34

A second approach used in their work was enlisting the assistance of Catholic laity and religious congregations of women. Every congregation of Catholic sisters in the city “showed great interest” in the work and often collaborated with Santa Maria in assisting the poor. They willingly shared resources, sent donations, and opened their facilities to clients referred by the Santa Maria Sisters. This was particularly true of the Good Shepherd Sisters who worked closely with Sisters Justina and Blandina in ministering to girls entrusted to them by the courts.

The sisters also procured the support of many dedicated lay men and women, eventually forming the “Willing Worker League” to formalize their activities. The women, particularly, served on committees, taught classes, and sponsored events for children, sometimes even in their own homes. These women also accompanied sisters on their visits to hospitals and jails. In one journal entry Sister Justina reported that Miss Smith “accompanied Sister Blandina on her visits to the poor and some of the sights were pitiable, but she did not shirk the work.” In commenting on how much good these fervent ladies did on their hospital visits, Sister Justina wrote: “The influence of a refined lady is wonderful. A Sister is expected to speak of heavenly things — it is her profession you may say — but when a charming lady of the world has the good God in her heart, and she shows it by sacrificing part of her time and her pleasure in comforting the sad and the wretched and winning their souls to better things, it brings more clearly to the sufferer that God should be the first thought of all of those who are in sorrow.”35

34  J-2, 3 May 1903, Ibid.
35  J-1, 28 February 1899; and 30 April 1899, Ibid.
Soliciting financial assistance was essential if the sisters were to sustain their ministries. They worked hard to secure a legacy left to the diocese, sought donations from organizations and private individuals, and even secured support from the Italian government. In June 1900 Sister Justina wrote to Queen Margaret of Italy requesting a donation for their fundraiser. She told the queen, “It is our desire to have in the bazaar a department to represent Italy and to be known as ‘Queen Margaret’s Palace.’” The Queen sent five hundred lires in gold in response to Sister Justina’s appeal.36 At the same time this intrepid sister wrote to the Italian Consul in Chicago asking his intercession in securing Italian textbooks from the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs.37

Conclusion

Sisters Justina and Blandina knew no bounds. They were persistent and tireless in going about their work. They demonstrated no shyness in approaching both friend and foe, and traveled a long, frustrating road before they secured their work in acquiring a building. Their endless patience and boundless enthusiasm attracted others to join them, and enabled them to continually expand their reach. Truly their work was blessed as they relied on God and worked like Trojans!

St. Vincent urged his followers: “We must be all for God in the service of the people.”38 These women, through their work at the Santa Maria Institute, were faithful to his exhortation. In her Journals, Sister Justina quoted a hymn dedicated to Mother Seton which exemplifies their embodiment of the Charity charism:

36 J-1, 2 June 1900; and 7 April 1901, Ibid.
37 J-1, 29 October 1900; and 15 January 1901, Ibid.
38 “Repetition of Prayer,” June 1658, CCD, 11:357.
Hail, hail loved Mother Seton
Thy daughters sing to thee.
Hail, hail St. Vincent’s daughter
Resounds o’er land and sea.

In lonely penal prisons
In dismal convict cell,
Are seen thy faithful daughters
Of heavenly Hope to tell.

The sobbing babe deserted
The pitiful insane
The deaf-mute and the sightless
Thy daughters’ care sustains.

Wher’ere there’s human sorrow
Thy daughters hast with love
Urged by Christ-like compassion
To guide the soul above.  

For Sisters Justina and Blandina this passage is truly what it meant to be a Sister of Charity in the early twentieth century.

39 J-3, 24 February 1910, SMI Papers.
Portrait of Sisters Blandina and Justina Segale.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
Sr. Justina Segale’s Teaching Certificate.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
A kindergarten class at Santa Maria.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
A lace collar embroidered by a child in one of Santa Maria’s after-school programs.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
A dance class at Santa Maria, 1939.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
The Santa Maria Institute.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH