

# Celebrating 125 Years – The Journey Continues

Sixth in a series of seven articles by Sister Judine Mayerle, OSB (jmayerle@css.edu)

When Mother Scholastica Kerst, then Prioress of St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, first stepped off a train in Duluth on a cold December 15 afternoon in 1880 to determine whether she should send Sisters to Duluth to teach, she had no idea what she was setting in motion. She had no idea that she would become Prioress of the Duluth foundation of Benedictine Sisters, that they would build schools, hospitals, a college, and a Benedictine Health Center that would become part of their own Benedictine Health System. She might have smiled as she walked toward the depot had she known that 137 years later, on December 5, 2017, Dr. Colette Geary, the first laywoman to be president of The College of St. Scholastica, would stand in similar cold on the steps of Tower Hall getting ready to lead the countdown to the annual lighting of the Christmas tree, that Geary would look up in awe at the grandeur of Tower Hall and call it "a magnificent testament to what can only be described as an audacious vision of the Benedictine Sisters."

Although Mother Scholastica probably wouldn't have described hers as "an audacious vision," she once said, "My dream is that someday there will rise upon these grounds fine buildings, like the great Benedictine abbeys of Europe. They will be built of stone; within their walls, higher education will flourish; the Divine Office will be said, and the beautiful ceremonies of the liturgy will be carried out." She saw the construction of only the first section of Tower Hall before she died in June 1911 and thus never saw her dream fulfilled, but over the years the Community carried a piece of that prophetic dream forward. The Sisters who succeeded her as Prioress, supported by the growing Community, all had a piece of the vision and the courage to move it forward.

## Evolution of the Audacious Vision

Sister Alexia Kerst succeeded her sister, Mother Scholastica, and continued the tradition of sending Sisters for higher education and encouraged the expansion of the Academy's curriculum to include a two-year junior college. Mother Celestine Sullivan, elected after the death of Mother Alexia on May 22, 1916, was



*"The Villa" after 1921 when the gymnasium/auditorium (left) was built.*

a good administrator who retired much of the debt that had accrued through land purchase, construction of the first section of the motherhouse, and other costly projects. Mother Chrysostom Doran followed Mother Celestine as Prioress in August 1919, and her leadership saw an expansion of Tower Hall, including an addition to the northwest wing with a 120-seat Chapel, completion of the first tower, and construction of a gymnasium/auditorium. She also led the Community in building the center section of St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth and a new wing on St. Joseph's Hospital in Brainerd, Minnesota.

## Mother Agnes Somers ~ Builder and Educator

Mother Agnes Somers, who succeeded Mother Chrysostom in June 1924, was Prioress of the Duluth Benedictines for eighteen years and is remembered as "The Builder." A story often repeated over the years was that after her election, Mother Chrysostom suggested to Mother Agnes that "we probably shouldn't build anything more for a while." Mother Agnes may have agreed, but two years later, recognizing

the need for more space for the growing College and the increasing membership of the Community, completed the original plan for Tower Hall, with a second (north) tower, an elaborate lobby below the towers with a main entrance, and an additional wing, giving it the footprint it has today. (See *Pathways* Fall 2017 for construction details and photographs.)



*Construction begins for the first cloister walk at the south end of Tower Hall. The wood porches on each floor were replaced with porches of stone, and the first floor porch, which had been the main entrance to Tower Hall, became a lobby with a switchboard /information window, seating for guests, and an exterior door referred to as the “cloister entrance,” now known as the Peace Door. The main entrance to Tower Hall can be seen below the two towers.*

Archival records show that Mother Agnes believed that each graduate of The College of St. Scholastica be not only a well-educated woman, but a cultural, social, and spiritual leader as well. She stressed academic leadership and research as an integral part of the College’s commitment to Benedictine values. More Sisters received their graduate degrees and became leaders within the College. And while the curriculum emphasized theology and liberal arts, under her leadership the Sisters sought to meet the vocational needs of immigrant populations as well as staffing requirements of their own hospitals and schools. In 1928 the College, in conjunction with St. Mary’s School of Nursing, extended its curricular offerings to include combined academic and basic professional programs leading to a Bachelor of Science degree and a diploma in nursing, among the first of its kind in the nation.

As both College and Community continued to grow, Mother Agnes and the Sisters knew it was again time to build, despite the possibility of war in Europe and the United States still suffering the effects of the Great Depression. Construction was a sign of hope and belief in the future, and it would provide employment for many. Architectural plans were drawn for a chapel/library, a five-story high school building, an auditorium, and two connecting cloister walks. Contracts were let on July 1, 1936,



*Preparing the site for the foundation of the chapel/library in 1936. The west end of Tower Hall can be seen to the right, the gymnasium in the background.*



*Construction of the Chapel of Our Lady Queen of Peace, 1937. Photo taken from the choir loft.*



*Interior of the original Chapel of Our Lady Queen of Peace. The chapel was three stories high, with two side transept chapels dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph.*



and because the entire construction project was scheduled for completion in two years, work began at once. The chapel was put under the patronage of the Blessed Mother and given the name “Our Lady Queen of Peace” because of the growing threat of war in Europe. Bishop Thomas A. Welch consecrated the main altar of Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel on August 1, 1938, and a Solemn Pontifical High Mass was celebrated along with the blessing of the Chapel on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption.



*The Chapel of Our Lady Queen of Peace has been the center of the campus since its dedication in 1938.*



*It was customary in medieval abbeys to locate the library near or as part of the church. The CSS college library was slightly below ground and beneath the Chapel.*



*A “book brigade” of Sisters moving books from small libraries in Tower Hall to the new library before the start of the school year in Fall 1938.*



*Stanbrook Hall when completed in 1938. Named after a Benedictine abbey in England, it housed the new girls’ high school, including classrooms, offices, and residence space for the students and some Sisters. It closed in 1967 when the “new” Cathedral High School opened (now the Marshall School) and the Community took over the building for the Monastery.*

At the south end of the massive building project stood Stanbrook Hall. The first class of young women moved into the new high school in January 1938, with 38 students in its graduating class. During the 30 years of its existence, enrollment averaged 250 students per year with 40-50 seniors graduating each year. The main focus of the curriculum was college preparation, although art, music, typing, and home economics were also offered. Most of the faculty were Sisters, although a number of laywomen became part of the Stanbrook family. When the new Duluth Cathedral High School opened on the hilltop overlooking the city in Fall 1963 with a student body that was half male, Stanbrook’s enrollment began

to decline; by 1967 there were only 150 students. After educating some 1500 students, the high school closed. The influence of Stanbrook Hall on the women who spent their formative high school years in the private school overlooking Lake Superior was evident by their loyalty in returning year after year for their Stanbrook Hall Reunion.

## Decades of Tumultuous Change

The next thirty years saw two Sisters of very different temperament and style provide balanced, productive leadership for the Community during a time of difficult change. Mother Athanasius Braegelman succeeded Mother Agnes and served from 1942-1954 and 1960-1966. Mother Martina Hughes served from 1954-1960 and again from 1966-1972.

Community membership reached a peak in 1965 with 520 members. Additional parish schools were being staffed in Duluth and northeastern Minnesota as well as in Minneapolis, Phoenix, and Cincinnati. In 1961 Pope John XXIII asked all religious communities to send ten percent of their members as missionaries to Latin America. A priest of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Antofagasta, Chile, wrote to Mother Athanasius, asking for help with their school. Four Sisters who volunteered went first to Cuernavaca, Mexico, for immersion studies in Spanish and then to Antofagasta. Several more Sisters joined them and opened a health-care clinic in addition to working in the parish and the school. The Sisters left Chile in 1979 when the mission became self-sustaining.

In 1962 the Community recognized that the College's growing student body, housed primarily in Tower Hall, needed a separate residence building with dining room, kitchen, and lounges. A requirement for a federal loan was that the recipient institution be independently incorporated. For this financial reason the College was legally separated from the Benedictine Community on February 27, 1962, enabling the College to receive financial assistance for future additional buildings. Although sponsored by the Sisters to the present day, the College's leadership includes a Board of Trustees that has evolved to include both Sisters and laypeople. In addition to becoming separately incorporated and expanding the physical plant and academic programs, an important step in ensuring continued growth was the decision to become a coeducational institution. Male students were accepted in Fall 1969 when 39 men enrolled, 23 of them freshmen.

Mother Athanasius and then Mother Martina had wanted the Community to have pontifical status and membership in a Benedictine congregation. This would put the Community under the Abbot Primate in Rome and remove it from the direct control of the local bishop. It would also give the Community the ongoing support of other members of the congregation. The question had surfaced during Mother Athanasius' first term as Prioress, but Chapter deliberations of such a significant change in status



*Rockhurst Auditorium, used by the Community for Chapter meetings and movies, and by the College and high school for commencements, convocations, concerts, and theatrical productions. It was named "Rockhurst" in recognition of the hillside with rocks and a variety of trees immediately behind the building.*



*Construction of College Street to connect with Kenwood Avenue in 1940, with Villa Sancta Scholastica, as it was known then, in the background overlooking Lake Superior.*



continued until the end of Mother Martina's first term. In 1959 when the Community joined the Federation of St. Benedict and attained Pontifical Status, its name was changed from "Villa Sancta Scholastica" to "St. Scholastica Priory" and then "St. Scholastica Monastery" as it is known today.

## Turbulent Times

The years following the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 were a time of change and upheaval in the Church and in the Duluth Benedictine Community. Religious communities throughout the world were suddenly faced with challenges they had never anticipated. To many it seemed every sacred belief was being questioned, but to others it was a time that called for creativity and courage and a deep faith that God was clearly speaking to the Church.

During her second term of office Mother Martina spent most of those six years coping with the crises resulting from Vatican II. A new vision of religious life was rapidly developing, and archival records show that she was up to the challenge. As she described in an interview years later, she had two choices: try to slow the tide of change, or help move the Community ahead. She knew the first choice was probably impossible and could cause the defection of Sisters who were younger and more progressive. To move ahead would place more responsibility on individual Sisters; some would handle it well, others would not. Her decision was to move ahead, knowing it would cause polarization in the Community. As more opportunities arose for the laity to work for the Church, such as the Peace Corps, Vista, and Papal Volunteers, some Sisters wondered if they could be of more service in those organizations than in religious communities. Others questioned the validity of their vocation, questioned their motives for entering "the convent." Many left. Fewer women entered the Community. Those who stayed were divided in their response to the call for *aggiornamento* – one of the key expressions Vatican II used to describe internal spiritual renewal and external adaptation of the Church's laws and institutions to the times.

Divisions within the Benedictine Community were reflected externally by many who changed from the traditional black habit, white coif, and long veil, to a shorter habit with shorter veil, which ultimately led to many wearing the clothing preferred by laywomen of the time. It also led to Sisters taking more active roles in pastoral ministry, pursuing art and writing as new ministries, and earning graduate degrees in areas other than what had been the tradition. In June 1972 conservative Community members who were not supportive of *aggiornamento* in the Church or in the Community rallied around Sister Verona LaBud with sufficient votes to elect her Prioress. The Duluth Benedictines who historically had shared the same dream expressed by their founding Sisters found themselves in what can only be described as a "house divided." More Sisters left the Community during the three years following the election, finding the culture within the Community not supportive of what they believed God was calling them to do. Archival records show that Mother Verona realized she could not continue as leader of the fragmented Community and in May 1975 resigned her position of Prioress.

## A New Beginning Under New Leadership

Sister Grace Marie Braun was elected the ninth Prioress of the Duluth Benedictines on June 16, 1975, by the Priory Chapter. She was faced with the challenge of restoring unity, trust, and stability to a Community that had experienced such upheaval during the years following Vatican II and the loss of so many Sisters. Dr. Bruce Stender, then president of The College of St. Scholastica, described her leadership style after she delivered the commencement address to the Class of 1980: "The times have increasingly demanded a special kind of leadership, a gift for standing between two worlds and finding and keeping what is good in each, a talent for unifying what might easily become vastly disparate, a deep capacity to weigh values so that the significant not be lost in the trivial, and that God remain the still point in the turning world. To you, then, Mother Grace Marie, because you have kept your balance in an unbalanced world and have proven yourself a leader in these, 'the best of times and the worst of times,' the Faculty and Trustees of The College of St. Scholastica are pleased to confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*."

A major issue facing Mother Grace Marie was an aging membership and diminished numbers. Fewer women were entering the Community, and it was necessary to withdraw Sisters from a number of the Community's long-time ministries. Another challenge was nursing care for the infirm and elderly members of the Community. Stanbrook Hall High School had been closed in 1967 and repurposed as a motherhouse. This had made it possible to renovate the building's second floor for those who needed assisted living, although more space was needed. Ten years later a fire in Rockhurst Auditorium, part of Stanbrook, brought a solution. Because the fire was contained at the west end of the auditorium and the building was deemed structurally sound, the Community decided it would no longer be used as an auditorium. Instead, a second floor was built across the two-story auditorium to enlarge the assisted living area and to divide the first floor into a large dining room, kitchen, and meeting room for the Monastery. Because this change meant the College no longer had an auditorium, it began to use the gymnasium/theatre building for its theatrical productions and named it the "Little Theatre."

The Community was coming together as a stable and unified group, which again clearly evidenced the courageous vision of their founders. A decision was made to hire Duluth architect Thomas A. Vecchi to design a three-story 120-bed nursing home connected to Stanbrook that would be open to both Sisters and laypeople and that would fulfill the Sisters' desire to "add years to life and life to years."

Groundbreaking was held on April 30, 1978, and the Benedictine Health Center opened on October 12, 1980, with Sister Armella Oblak as Administrator. Unique to the BHC was the inclusion of a children's day-care center on the first floor of the wing connected to the Priory, with a fenced playground in front of the Center in full view of the residents. The day-care center was included by the planning committee after learning that Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, author of *Death and Dying*, had expressed the hope that one day she would hear of a nursing home that included a children's day-care center, because "boredom and loneliness are plagues of older adults, and young children bring noise and laughter."

Another construction project under Mother Grace Marie's leadership was her proposal that the three-story Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel space be exchanged for the single-story college library space that was



*Herb Klippen, general contractor, shows a section of the plans to Mother Grace Marie Braun, Prioress, and Sister Kathleen Hofer, Chair of the Building Committee.*



*Architectural drawing of the Benedictine Health Center*



below the chapel. She said, “This would give the college the space it needs for expansion of the library. It would provide direct barrier-free access to the chapel from the cloister walk, we would be able to design the chapel in accordance with the most recent norms for worship, it would be more energy efficient, and the exterior of the building would remain unchanged.”

With the insertion of two more floors the library would at least double the size of its existing footage. The College was interested, structural feasibility was determined, and the Chapter met in January 1985 for days of prayer, reflection, and discussion, and then made the decision to move forward. By February a design phase was under way, and construction began in July 1985 and was completed in September 1986. Formal dedication of the new Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel took place on October 12.

In 1985 under the leadership of Mother Grace Marie the Benedictine Health System was established which led to separately incorporating the Community’s health-care institutions. Today the nonprofit, mission-based health system is one of the largest senior care organizations in the country with more than 35 senior care communities in five states. The BHS provides complete long-term care services, including assisted living, skilled nursing, memory care, and independent housing, as well as short-term care and outpatient rehabilitation services.

Sister Clare Marie Trettel succeeded Mother Grace Marie in 1987 and for six years led a Community that was unified and eager to focus on its social and spiritual mission. She assumed leadership in a transitional time of aging members, fewer women entering the Community, and changing ministries. Under her leadership the Community decided to build Stanbrook West, a residence for about 70 Sisters, and the first building to be constructed for their exclusive use. Construction began in October 1989 and the building was completed in the summer of 1991. Sisters living in Tower Hall, the main college building, moved out, and the College was free to expand into and remodel the additional space.

When asked in 1991 what she thought the future held for the Community, Sister Clare Marie replied, “Certainly a continued and increasing involvement of the laity in our mission. Our numbers will be fewer, but our impact need not be less. We will look for new ways to minister, and perhaps new ministries in which to serve. We will continue to adapt and, when necessary, to risk.”

## Health-Care Looks to the Future

St. Mary’s Hospital, founded in 1888, had from the beginning been the Duluth Benedictines’ flagship hospital. As the city grew, St. Mary’s Hospital did as well, expanding numerous times over the years.



*Interior of the new Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel.*



*Stanbrook West groundbreaking. Sister Clare Marie Trettel, Prioress, third from left, with members of the Building Committee and other Sisters, invites them to begin digging the foundation for the new residence building.*

The Duluth Clinic, founded in 1915, expanded several times in different locations during the next 60 years, until in 1971 its physician leaders knew they had to relocate and began exploring their options and searching for land. An unexpected offer came from Sister Marybelle Leick, then administrator of St. Mary's Hospital, which owned an entire city block directly across the street from the hospital on East Third Street. Sister Marybelle was aware, as were the physicians, of the growing trend of hospitals and clinics sharing medical practices. Although the hospital and clinic remained separate institutions when the new Duluth Clinic Third Street building opened in 1975, a stronger partnership began to form. Collaboration resulted in the two institutions opening the region's first neonatal intensive care unit in 1976, diagnostic imaging services in the early 1980s, and a joint open-heart surgery program and regional heart center in 1983 in a newly-remodeled wing of St. Mary's Medical Center. By 1990 it became clear that an even closer partnership between the two institutions could be a next step.

In 1992 Duluth Clinic President Dr. Phil Eckman and other physician leaders began meeting with representatives of the Benedictine Sisters about the possibility of integration with St. Mary's Medical Center. One of the challenges was whether a secular physician practice and a Catholic hospital could integrate without either losing its identity. According to *Timeless Vision: the History of the Duluth Clinic from 1915-2015*, "after four years, hundreds of meetings and thousands of conversations, they made an historic conclusion. Whatever their superficial differences, both organizations shared a common mission – to make a healthy difference in people's lives. As long as they claimed a common set of values and a clear purpose, the partnership would thrive."

When they were ready to make the integration official in December 1996, "the legal aspects were so complex that it took Clinic President Dr. Peter Person and St. Mary's Administrator Sister Kathleen Hofer four hours to sign every document provided by their lawyers." St. Mary's Duluth Clinic Health System – SMDC – would be led by a physician CEO, with the Benedictine Sisters retaining their influence through seats on the Board of Directors.

As SMDC moved into the 21st Century, it entered into a new partnership with the Benedictine Health System, established by the Duluth Benedictines in 1985, and expansion continued to meet the health-care needs of northeastern Minnesota and beyond. The College of St. Scholastica has also grown since its inception in 1912 as a two-year undergraduate women's college, becoming a comprehensive coeducational school offering baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral programs at several locations and online.

## The Community Looks to a New Century

The challenges the Duluth Benedictines face today as we seek to "re-found" our Benedictine Community in this second decade of the Third Millennium are much more daunting than those faced by our founding Sisters. Where they saw increasing membership, we see diminishing numbers. Where their members were predominantly young, ours are more demographically diverse with a rising median age. Where their ministry involved staffing hospitals and schools with the many women who became members of the Duluth Benedictines, we find the continued growth of our sponsored ministries in health care and education increasingly resting in the hands of dedicated lay leaders. And where our founding Sisters lived during a time of great expansion of Catholicism and religious life in the United States, we live in a period of decline not only in vocations to religious life and the priesthood, but also in the membership of the Catholic faithful.

But despite the changing landscape of religious life in today's Church and culture, we celebrate our 125th anniversary with hope and trust. Although we are facing a future we never imagined, and although we are already living in times we never anticipated, our history as Benedictine women in the Diocese of Duluth has been in response to God's will for us, and we continue to seek what God is calling us to do as we look to the future. And what we have learned from the women and men of vision who brought us to this time is that it will take that same audacious vision to respond to the incredible paradigm shifts that await us.