

MASS OF THANKSGIVING FOR ST. THEODORA GUERIN

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, WHITING

DECEMBER 3, 2006

Dear Father Kalicky, Father Scherer, Father Dominik, dear Sisters of Providence who have traveled here to rejoice with us, dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord Jesus:

Today we begin a new Church year. Today we also begin our preparations to celebrate Christmas, the feast of God's love for us. Who better to accompany us on our spiritual journey toward the Feast of Christmas, who better to accompany us through this entire liturgical year in which we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Diocese of Gary, than the first saint of Indiana, our very own saint, St. Theodora Guerin?

We gather today to give praise and thanks to God for the canonization of St. Theodora Guerin. I sense here the same pride, the same joy and excitement, that I sensed among the 1200 pilgrims from Indiana who participated in the Mass in St. Peter's Square in which Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed Blessed Mother Theodore Guerin a saint for the veneration and edification of the Church throughout the world. How excited we were to see St. Theodora Guerin's portrait displayed so magnificently on the façade of

St. Peter's Basilica! How thrilled we were to hear the Sisters of Providence sing that solemn papal liturgy in St. Peter's Square!

I sense the same joy and gratitude this morning here in this parish where the Sisters of Providence have taught for so many years as there was in the historic St. Paul Outside the Walls Basilica where the 1200 Hoosier pilgrims gathered for the first solemn Mass of Thanksgiving concelebrated by the five bishops of Indiana.

Clearly, St. Theodora took to heart the words that St. Paul addressed to us in the Second Reading today: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father."

St. Theodora's heart truly abounded in love for God and for God's people to the point that she devoted herself entirely to the love of God and the love of His people in religious life. Hers was a life of total dedication. One of the Sisters of Providence described St. Theodora's spirituality in this way: "Her spirituality was based on a deep and personal relationship with Jesus; on a pragmatic acceptance of whatever came as a gift of God; on a deep and genuine love of everyone, no matter who they were; on a fundamentally common sense approach to life that saw all of life as gift, sometimes happy, sometimes not; and on a belief that the natural world carried with it powerful messages for all of us human beings."

In today's Gospel, Jesus urged us to be careful not to let our hearts become drowsy from the anxieties of daily life. Jesus admonished us to be vigilant at all times and to pray for the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and inevitable.

St. Theodora Guerin knew abundant sufferings in her life, but she never succumbed to her tribulations. Why? Because of her total trust in God's presence to her and God's love for her. She trusted totally in God's loving Providence. I propose that we find inspiration from and seek the intercession of St. Theodora Guerin when we feel very burdened with sorrows. Certainly, our sorrows, burdens, and challenges are small in comparison to what she suffered. I will cite only a few of her crosses and hardships.

She was born in 1798 in France just as the French Revolution was drawing to a close. Two of her siblings died very young. Her father was murdered when she was 15 and her mother was so overcome with grief that she, at age 15, had to assume responsibility for caring for herself and her younger sister.

St. Theodora entered the Sisters of Providence when she was 25. As a novice, she was sent to teach and in her first assignment she contracted a most serious illness. Her doctors damaged her digestive system as they tried to cure her. Henceforth, she could eat only simple, bland food. Despite

her continuing fragile health, St. Theodora, out of obedience, agreed to go to the forests of America to found a new community in the relatively new diocese that encompassed all of Indiana and the eastern half of Illinois. She and five other sisters left France on July 12, 1840, for what proved to be a very hazardous journey. Their ship was almost destroyed several times by a hurricane and other severe storms. She wrote in her diary of her feelings of “passing the night in the bottom of a vessel, hearing continually the dreadful creaking which makes one fear that it will split open. Nothing was heard on board but screams and lamentations.”

The Sisters immediately attended Mass after their stormy voyage. St. Theodora wrote again in her diary: “While shedding an abundance of tears, we renewed the consecration of ourselves for the mission to which God had deigned to call us.” At that point, they knew no one and trusted Divine Providence to direct them to Indiana.

In October 1840, St. Theodora and her Sisters arrived in the midst of the forests of Indiana. They spoke no English. They had nothing. Nonetheless, trusting again in Providence, Mother Theodore went about planning an academy for girls that would eventually become St. Mary-of-the-Woods College and she began to train young girls to become Sisters of Providence. On the first Christmas in the forests of Indiana, she became critically ill, suffering from fever, severe headaches, and periods of unconsciousness. This illness continued for almost two months. I propose

that St. Theodora would be a great model for those who suffer serious and seemingly never-ending health problems.

Another constant challenge for St. Theodora was to find funds to keep her convent and schools solvent. Despite her poor health, she returned to France where she spent 11 months raising money and attempting to clarify her heaviest cross of all, her relationship with the local bishop. You see, Bishop de la Hailandiere believed that he possessed total control over the Sisters of Providence. In fact, while St. Theodora was in France, he took over the community and closed a school the Sisters had established. At one point, he insisted that Mother Theodore was no longer superior and that she leave the diocese. God heard the prayers of the Sisters and of many others. The meddling bishop resigned in 1847 and his successor immediately resolved the difficulties. I suggest that those who are having difficulties with your superiors in your employment or elsewhere, seek the intercession of St. Theodora.

St. Theodora was not overcome by the crosses that found their way into her life. She did not become drowsy from the anxieties of daily hardships. Rather, taking to heart the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, she remained vigilant at all times and prayed that Divine Providence give her the strength to accomplish God's purpose in her life. With God's strength, she devoted her energies to building and nurturing her congregation and establishing schools. By the time of her death on May 14, 1856, having

labored only 16 years in the forests of Indiana, her community which began with six Sisters increased to 60. They were teaching 1200 children in the schools they established in 10 cities in Indiana and one in Illinois. They also operated two orphanages.

Dear Friends, may this woman of courage and great faith, this woman who placed herself humbly at the disposition of God's Providence, this woman who relied completely on prayer be an inspiration for you and accompany you on your Advent journey and throughout this liturgical year. In your burdens, whether of ill health, difficult relationships, or of whatever nature, consider her words: "What strength the soul draws from prayer! In the midst of a storm, how sweet is the calm it finds in the heart of Jesus."

St. Theodora Guerin, pray for us!