

Venerable Mother Mary Theresa Dudzik

Chicago's Apostle of Mercy

From the foundation of the parish in 1867 a significant number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life were born from St. Stanislaus Kostka. The parish had nurtured the lives of young men and women to serve the Church in Chicago and throughout the world. Sixty-four men from St. Stanislaus Kostka became priests and nearly 310 women from the parish became religious sisters joining various congregations and religious orders. Among these Josephine Dudzik has a unique place in the history of Chicago.

In 1881, at the age of 21, Josephine Dudzik left Poland and arrived in the United States where she took residence with her family in the neighborhood surrounding St. Stanislaus Kostka. Under the spiritual direction of the parish's pastor, Fr. Vincent Barzynski, she began a journey that would eventually lead her to the founding of the Franciscan Sisters of Blessed Kunegunda, presently known as the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago. Josephine took the name, Mary Theresa, and for her heroic virtue and tireless labor among the poor, the sick, and the orphaned, the Church has given her the title Venerable. Her cause for beatification is still underway.

After the sudden death of her father in 1889, Josephine Dudzik took care of her mother, was very active doing a variety of works in the parish and was especially compelled to engage in works of mercy. She had already espoused herself to Christ entrusting her life to his divine will knowing that choosing God would manifest itself in action toward others:

I felt the misery and sufferings of others. It seemed to me that I could never love Jesus enough, or expect heaven, if I were concerned with my mother and myself alone, so as not to suffer any inconvenience but just to live in comfort... I felt a persistent urge to accomplish greater sacrifice for others... this continuous thought, how to be of service to the needy and sick... never left me but remained with me day and night.

As Josephine Dudzik gave visible witness to the sincerity of her consecration to Christ and her labor of mercy to the poor, the widowed, the sick, and the disabled, even giving them refuge in her own home, other women from the parish began to assist her. To these women Josephine became a teacher and

mentor and they became her *disciples*. Eventually this led to the foundation of her religious community of consecrated Sisters who were officially recognized on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1894.

Josephine Dudzik took the religious name Mother Mary Theresa Dudzik in keeping with the Church's ancient tradition dating back to Biblical history – a new name signifies a new mission in life and the renunciation of one's will to do solely the will of God. She was affectionately called, *Chicago's Apostle of Mercy*.

The newly formed Franciscan Sisters of Chicago would soon take residence in the Lewandowski house which still stands today three houses east of Noble Street on Evergreen Street alongside St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish. From there the Franciscan Sisters eventually moved as their mission and apostolates quickly grew beyond the boundaries of St. Stanislaus Kostka to other newly formed neighborhoods in Chicago.

Mother Mary Theresa Dudzik suffered much toward the end of her life. In a debilitated state, only months before her death, one of her Sister's testified: "She was always seen busy without ever a word of complaint... always the first to enter the chapel and the last one to leave... always edifying anyone who beheld her contemplative form before the Blessed Sacrament." She died painfully but peacefully on September 20, 1917 and was buried quietly three days later. Today her body rests at the Mother House of the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago in Lemont, Illinois.

Blase Cardinal Cupich's blessing of the image of Venerable Mother Theresa Dudzik leaves a reminder to all who come through the doors of St. Stanislaus Kostka that our faith in God compels us to sacrificial love and the merciful care of others.