

# GOLDEN LINKS

*The Shared History of the Dominican Sisters of Adrian and Grand Rapids, Michigan*



J.M.J.D.



MARYWOOD

The Motherhouse of Dominican Sisters  
Grand Rapids 6, Michigan

February 24, 1944

Dear Mother Gerald,

The announcement of the death of Sister M. Pius was received and I am writing to express the sincere sympathy of our community to you and your Sisters. It is sad to see these dear old Sisters in both your community and ours leaving us one by one. They seem as it were the golden links that have bound us together. I am having a novena of Masses said for the repose of Sister's soul. May she now enjoy the reward of her long years of loving service.

With every good wish, I am

Sincerely yours in St. Dominic,

*"It is sad to see these dear old Sisters in both your community and ours leaving us one by one. They seem as it were the golden links that have bound us together."*

— Letter from Mother Euphrasia Sullivan, Prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, to Mother Gerald Barry, Prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Adrian.

# GOLDEN LINKS

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The Shared History of the Dominican Sisters  
of Adrian and Grand Rapids, Michigan

Out from the east to Michigan  
they come apace with eagerness,  
wise, never-wavering women  
heedless of stubborn barriers in the road,  
careless of numbing cold and scanty pilgrim food,  
finding warmth in comforting the old,  
and nourishment in educating youth.

Daughters of wayfaring Father,  
they wend their buoyant way in trust,  
gathering strength from common life,  
garnering wisdom in prayer.

Attracted by these pilgrim pioneers  
Young vibrant women join the growing band  
Afire with zeal for Dominic Guzman's way —  
Hoard not the seed but cast it wide —  
fanning out to villages and towns  
to minister in parishes and schools,  
sharing gifts of learning  
and fruits of contemplation  
with all they serve.

SISTER NOREEN MCKEOUGH, OP

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# PREFACE

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This collaborative research project, *GOLDEN LINKS: The Shared History of the Dominican Sisters of Adrian and Grand Rapids, Michigan*, grew out of a chance discussion between us, the Prioresses of the Dominican Sisters of Adrian and the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, in 2018. We were both aware of our early shared history as members of the Dominican Sisters of the Most Holy Rosary, missioned beginning in 1877 to the “inland island” of Michigan from our common motherhouse on the island of Manhattan, New York. Our presence in Michigan had expanded in response to the need such that by 1885 we were formed into a province of the New York congregation, named St. Joseph Province, based in Traverse City. Four years later, the provincialate was moved to Grand Rapids when our sisters opened an orphanage in that city at the request of the Bishop of Grand Rapids.

Our shared history began to diverge in 1892 when the New York congregation established a second Michigan province, also named St. Joseph Province, based in Adrian in the southeast part of the state. Two years later, on August 30, 1894, the shared history ended when the Bishop of Grand Rapids announced the separation of the Sisters of Grand Rapids from the New York congregation.

As in many legacy tales, there are differences in the story that is told, and those differences are often reflected in the interpretations of the facts behind them. We were inquisitive as to the history of our separation.

Now was the time to collaboratively review the source material and documents related to the separation that took place in 1894 and to tell this important story from our differing experiences. While the extensive research undertaken did not lead to any startling new discoveries of primary source material — record-keeping in the early days was not exactly, shall we say, robust — the goal was to explore the story

with fresh eyes and essentially start with a blank page, bringing the two stories together into one narrative and attempting to resolve the discrepancies. We are deeply grateful to each of the individuals involved in the research and writing of this story (see p. 25) — with the added challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic — and to all who had a part in contributing to its layout, design and printing.

We hope you will appreciate the nuances and complexities of human relationships revealed in this narrative of common beginnings and then separation, a narrative that continues to hold some mystery and discrepancies among us. Life is seldom linear or one dimensional. By honoring the complexity of human relationships as both mystery and grace may we continue to unfold the story of our common and unique Dominican identities as it brings us together in new ways, with greater appreciation for sharing our future Dominican life.



*Patricia A. Siemen, OP*

**Patricia Siemen, OP, Prioress**  
Dominican Sisters of Adrian

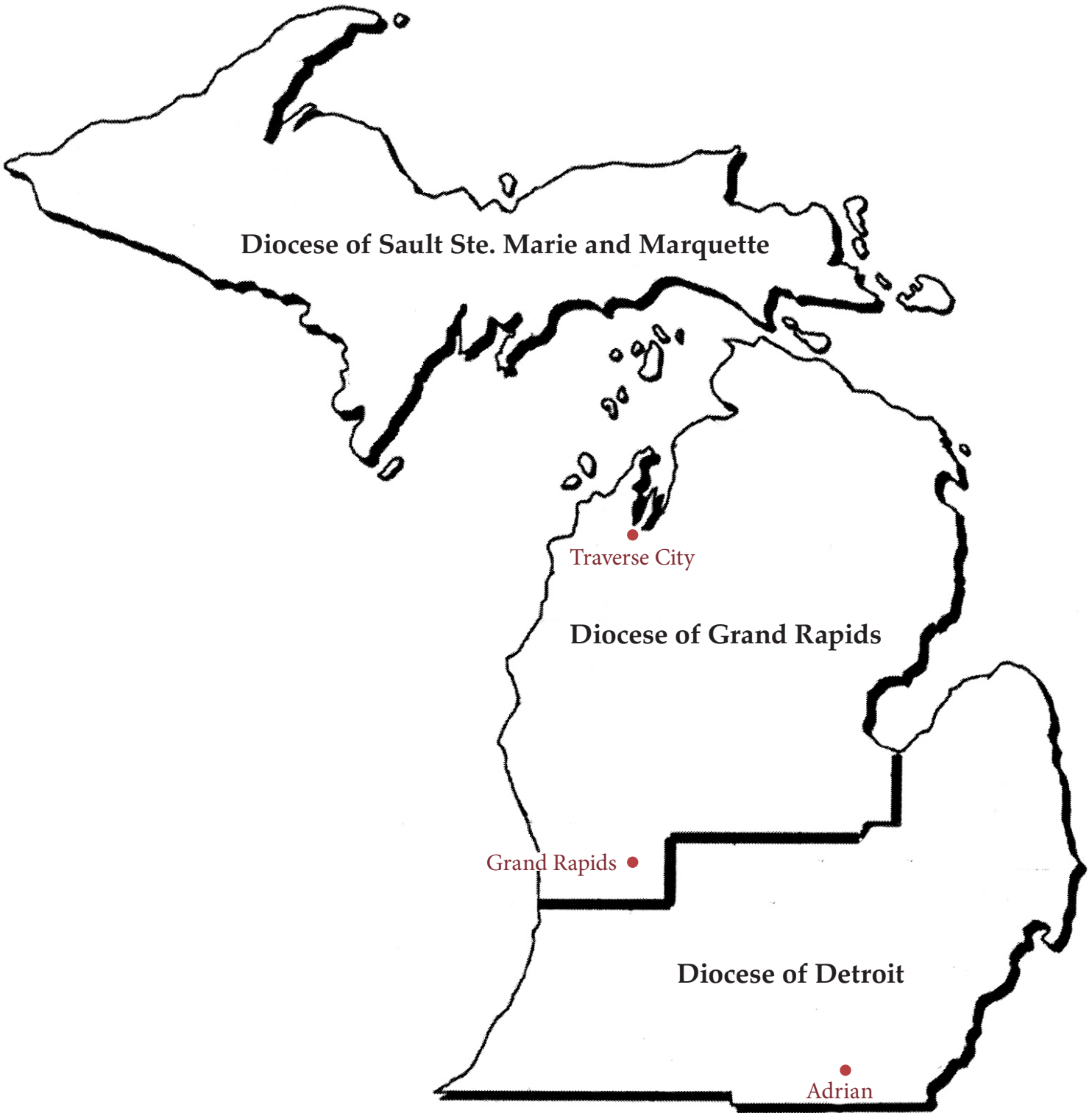


*Sr. Sandra Delgado OP*

**Sandra Delgado, OP, Prioress**  
Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids

# Michigan Dioceses - 1882

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# From Germany to New York to Michigan

On August 26, 1853, a small group of Dominican nuns from Holy Cross Convent in Ratisbon, Germany, arrived in New York City, planting the seed from the Ratisbon “tree” from which grew multiple congregations of Dominican women in the United States. This little band of pioneers established themselves first in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and as their numbers grew their presence expanded to

Second Street in Manhattan and beyond. Eventually, in 1877, a group of nuns from the Second Street convent (Holy Rosary Convent), went to Traverse City, Michigan, to open a Catholic school in St. Francis Parish.

For the next 17 years, the Dominican presence in Michigan was based in Traverse City. Then, in 1894, everything changed.



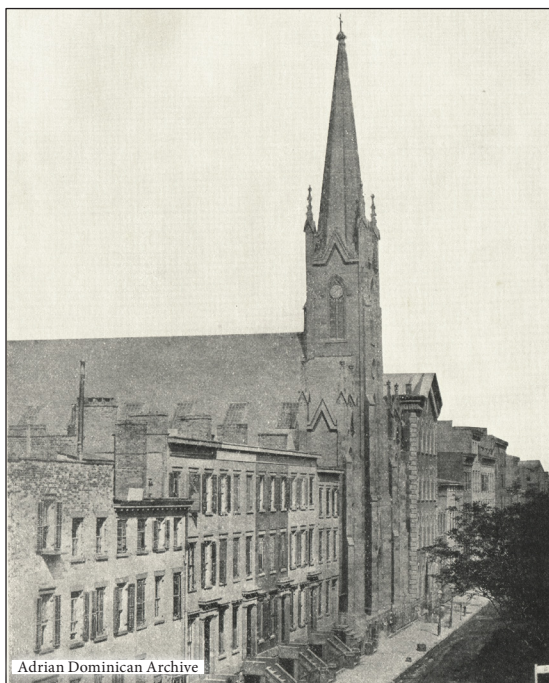
Adrian Dominican Archive

*Holy Cross Convent, Ratisbon, Germany*



Adrian Dominican Archive

*The convent and school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn*



Adrian Dominican Archive

*Holy Rosary Convent on Second Street, New York*



Grand Rapids Dominican Archive

*Traverse City school and convent, pictured in 1957. The school's two classrooms were on the first floor; the convent and kitchen on the second.*

## Out of One, Two

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For the Dominican sisters in the dioceses of Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan, August 30, 1894 — the feast of St. Rose of Lima — proved to be a fateful day.

Grand Rapids Bishop Henry Joseph Richter chose that date to announce to the Dominicans in his diocese that henceforth they would be an independent congregation, separated from their “parent” congregation — the Dominican Sisters of the Most Holy Rosary, at Second Street, New York City. No longer would there be two provinces of the New York congregation in Michigan, one based

in Traverse City and one in Adrian. Rather, one would be an independent congregation and the other would remain a province of the New York congregation. And, with Bishop Richter’s announcement, women who had been friends and served together suddenly found themselves in separate communities.

The announcement, while it seemed sudden to many of the sisters involved, had actually been several years in the making. The story begins in 1883, with Bishop Richter’s installation as the first bishop of the newly created Diocese of Grand Rapids.

## Bishop Henry Joseph Richter

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Heinrich (later Americanized to Henry) Joseph Richter was born April 9, 1838, in Neuenkirchen, Oldenburg, Germany. His family came to Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1854, when he was sixteen, and he was educated at St. Xavier College there and at St. Joseph College, Bardstown, Kentucky. He received his S.T.D. degree from the North American College in Rome in 1865 and was ordained that same year.

His priestly assignments included serving as a professor of dogmatic theology and philosophy, and later as vice president, at Mount St. Mary Seminary in Cincinnati, as chaplain for the Sisters of Charity in Cedar Grove, Ohio, and as pastor of St. Lawrence Parish in Cincinnati. He was appointed bishop of the new Diocese of Grand Rapids on January 30, 1883, and consecrated and installed that April 22.

Bishop Richter served as prelate in Grand Rapids until his death on December 26, 1916.



Courtesy, Diocese of Grand Rapids Archive

*Painting by J.M. Kavanagh*

Sources: Schwind and biographical data at [grdiocese.org](http://grdiocese.org), accessed 12/6/21

## A New Diocese in Michigan

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The Diocese of Grand Rapids was officially established by Pope Leo XIII on May 19, 1882. Carved out of the Diocese of Detroit, it included much of the state's Lower Peninsula, generally north of Lansing and west of the region known as the "Thumb" of Michigan. The Diocese of Detroit was left with the Thumb and the counties south of Ottawa, Kent, Montcalm, Gratiot and Saginaw, until that area was further reduced in later years by the creation of additional dioceses.

Bishop Richter was appointed January 30, 1883, and installed April 22 of the same year. That September, he traveled to Traverse City to dedicate, on the 9th of the month, the new Holy Angels Academy, operated by Dominican sisters from Holy Rosary Convent, Second Street, New York — one of whom was Mother Aquinata Fiegler.

## To Michigan, the 'Inland Island'

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Mother Aquinata and her eventual counterpart in Adrian, Mother Camilla Madden, had been two of the first group of Dominican sisters to set foot in Michigan.

When in 1877 Father George Ziegler of Traverse City's St. Francis Parish asked Mother Hyacinth Scheininger, Prioress of Holy Rosary Convent, to send sisters to open the parish school, it was widely seen by the Dominicans as the fulfillment of Mother Augustine Neuhierl's legendary deathbed vision of an "inland island" dotted white with Dominican habits.

Mother Hyacinth, Mother Augustine's successor as Prioress of Holy Rosary Convent, sent six sisters to Traverse City in October 1877. Among them were Mother Aquinata, who was the superior; then-Sister Camilla Madden, who would later become Provincial in Adrian and the founder of the Adrian Dominican Sisters; and Sister Angela Phelan, who would go on to have pivotal early roles in both the Adrian and the Everett (Edmonds), Washington,

congregations.

Mother Aquinata had previously been superior of St. Boniface School, Jersey City, New Jersey, and was in the early stages of getting a new convent and academy, St. Dominic, funded and built when Mother Augustine sent her to Michigan. In fact, at the end of 1877, once the sisters were established in Traverse City, Mother Aquinata returned to New Jersey to see the project through to completion (Kildee, p. 39, Schwind, p. 26).

She returned to Traverse City in May 1879. Mother Hyacinth had appointed her as visitator in Michigan, charged with overseeing the various foundations in the state.

As the Dominicans expanded their presence in Michigan over the next few years, Mother Aquinata was part of getting several of the new foundations up and running. She met the first groups of sisters assigned to St. Mary in Adrian and St. Mary in Muskegon (Kildee, p. 42), and in 1881 went to Bay City, leading the sisters

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who took over St. Boniface School and then those who opened St. Joseph School (Kildee, p. 43). She served as principal and French teacher at St. Joseph until 1884, by which time Holy Angels Academy in Traverse City had been

open for a year. She then returned to Traverse City and Sister Angela Phelan took her place in Bay City (Schwind, p. 29). As for Sister Camilla Madden, ill health had taken her back East for the time being.

## Mother Aquinata Fiegler

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*Painting by Sister Rosalia Genovese, OP*

Appolonia Fiegler was born in Worbis, Germany, on August 16, 1848. Her father and brother emigrated to the United States in either 1858 or 1859 and settled in New York. She and her mother followed in 1860.

She was received into Holy Cross Convent, Williamsburg (Brooklyn), New York, on February 15, 1864, at the age of fifteen, and received the habit and her religious name that August. She was sent to Holy Rosary Convent, on Second Street in New York City, in October

1864, and taught at St. Nicholas School. When the two convents separated, Sister Aquinata chose to remain with the Second Street foundation.

She was assigned to begin a new convent at St. Boniface Parish in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1872, and in 1877 was chosen to lead the pioneering group of sisters sent to Traverse City, Michigan. With the exception of a short time back in New Jersey to oversee the construction of the new St. Dominic Convent in Jersey City, she spent the next several years as visitator for the Dominican missions in Michigan. When the sisters in Michigan, including those in the new Grand Rapids Diocese, became a separate province of the Second Street congregation in 1885, Mother Aquinata became the Provincial. With the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids' independence in 1894, she became the congregation's founding Prioress.

Mother Aquinata served as the community's Prioress until her death of cancer at the age of sixty-seven on May 1, 1915. At the time of her death, her congregation served in more than forty schools and a home for orphans in the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

Sources: Schwind; Carling citing the Grand Rapids Herald, May 2, 1915

## The Councils of Baltimore

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In looking at the moves Bishop Richter undertook over the next decade, it is necessary to understand them in light of the three Plenary Councils of Baltimore, which took place in 1852, 1866, and 1884.

All three of these Councils dealt in some manner with the topic of Catholic education. The 1852 Council exhorted bishops to build Catholic schools in every parish whenever

possible; in 1866, the statement reiterated this exhortation and called for “teachers belonging to religious congregations” to be used when possible. In 1884, the Council mandated that every parish in the United States would build a school within two years and that pastors who did not do so could be removed; parishioners and parents faced their own mandates to support the effort and to send their children to parochial school.<sup>1</sup>

## The Wheels Begin to Turn: St. Joseph Province

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In August 1885, the houses in Michigan were given the status of a province of the Second Street convent, to be called the Province of St. Joseph, with Mother Aquinata as Provincial. This move itself would not have been unexpected; the foundations in the New York/New Jersey area alone were growing in number at the same time as the sisters’ presence in Michigan continued to expand (Murray, *Other Waters*, p. 63).

But Bishop Richter seems to have been very much involved in this process, as the first step toward the separation he sought. It was after personally discussing the situation with Mother Hyacinth that the province was established.

*The Right Reverend Bishop Richter, who recognized the possibilities of his co-laborers and especially the leader of the little colony, Mother Aquinata, negotiated with the proper authorities in New York, and obtained permission in August, 1885, for all the houses in Michigan to be formed into the new Province of St. Joseph’s.*

*Thus Holy Angels Convent became the Provincialate and Novitiate of the Dominican Sisters in Michigan (Kildee, p. 53; also see Murray, U.S. Catholic Historian, p. 66).*

Sister Mary Philip Ryan posits that the creation of the new province may have been initiated by Mother Hyacinth:

*Granted that the bishop shrewdly saw the potentiality of the province, it still seems likely that Mother Hyacinth took the initiative in approaching him on the matter. She was naturally concerned about holding her nuns together, and, at the same time, attracting new members to the Order. She realized that the sturdy pioneer spirit of Ratisbon would decline without solidarity, that the schools and the nuns would gain little without interchange of talents and ideas, and that a fertile field for vocations would waste away without a novitiate at hand in the Midwest. Even if she had been slow to act, Mother Aquinata, who was on the scene, would undoubtedly have urged the measure (Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, p. 57).*

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When Bishop Richter wrote to Michael Corrigan, who had become Archbishop of New York, on July 2, 1894, about his idea to make the Dominican sisters in his diocese an independent congregation, he mentioned that Mother Hyacinth had indeed had some role in the 1885 sequence of events by suggesting an alternative to independence:

*The community of Dominicans from 2nd Street New York has increased rapidly in this diocese. Many years ago I proposed a separation from the house in New York. The mother prioress then thought it best*

*to continue the union for some time, and proposed to establish our communities as a province (July 2, 1894, Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids and Dominican Sisters of Hope archives).<sup>2</sup>*

Whoever it was who actually set the wheels in motion, Mother Hyacinth or Bishop Richter, in 1885 the Dominican houses in Michigan became a province of the Second Street congregation. The first step in what Murray terms a “clerically engineered separation” (*U.S. Catholic Historian*, p. 64) had taken place.<sup>3</sup>



Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters Archive

*Holy Angels Academy, 1883*

## The Foundation in the Cornfield

Dominican sisters first arrived in Adrian in 1879 to teach at St. Mary School, followed the next year by another group of sisters for the city's other parish school, St. Joseph. Then, in 1884, Father Casimir Rohowski, pastor at St. Joseph, decided he wanted to found a hospital for injured railroad workers — Adrian being a major railway hub at the time — and requested that Mother Hyacinth send sisters to staff it. He purchased a farmhouse, which became known as the “Elm House,” on the northern outskirts of the city for the purpose.

Although the hospital never actually was needed for railroad workers, it did take on a number of sick and aged townspeople and quickly outgrew the little farmhouse. The sisters constructed a stately brick building just down the street, opening in 1886. This building would soon become the home of St. Joseph Academy and eventually the site of the motherhouse of the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

Several years passed more or less apace for the sisters “in the cornfield,” a description apt for its location. Then, on August 2, 1891, Mother Angela Phelan, who had been one of the original sisters sent to Traverse City from New York, unexpectedly arrived from Holy Angels Academy, which had served as provincialate and novitiate for the past six years — accompanied by a postulant, Matilda Ullrich. Mother Angela was to take charge of the hospital, which suddenly had become something much more.

Over the next two days, two more sisters came from Traverse City, each accompanied by a postulant from that provincial house. And as a result, “[t]hus came to pass the

quiet beginning of a novitiate in Adrian” (Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, p. 100). Shortly thereafter, three more young women arrived from various cities located, as was Adrian at that point, within the Diocese of Detroit.

What all this meant was not especially clear at the time and, indeed, no formal announcement of anything ever took place. But the effect of having a novitiate was that Adrian became its own province, also called the Province of St. Joseph. At some point, an unidentified sister in Grand Rapids wrote this undated note in a journal: “In August 1891 the Sisters in the Diocese of Detroit ceased to belong to the jurisdiction of Grand Rapids.”<sup>4</sup> Precisely what was meant by this enigmatic statement is somewhat unclear; of course, the sisters in the Diocese of Detroit would have been subject first to the New York motherhouse and, between 1885 and 1891, also to the provincialate based in Traverse City.

One year later, in August 1892, Mother Angela told the sisters in Adrian that she had been transferred to Aberdeen, Washington. There may have been any number of reasons for her



*The original “Elm House” hospital in Adrian.*

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transfer, and certainly speculation abounded, including the rumor that she had wished to separate Adrian from New York and merge with Grand Rapids “in the separation expected any moment.” (Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, p. 110). Actually, however, Mother Angela seems to have opposed Bishop Richter’s plan, and “Mother Hyacinth knew this too; otherwise she would hardly have sent her down to Adrian from Traverse City” (*ibid.*).

Whatever the reason for Mother Angela’s transfer to the province in the West, the end result was that the day after her departure, Mother Camilla Madden, one of the original Traverse City sisters and most recently the superior at St. Paul Convent in Greenville, New Jersey, arrived in Adrian as the new Provincial of Michigan’s other St. Joseph Province.



*The “red brick building,” constructed in 1886, became the home of St. Joseph Academy and site of the motherhouse of the Adrian Dominican Sisters.*

## Mother Camilla Madden

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Birr, Ireland, was the birthplace on May 3, 1854, of Mary Madden, who would become the founding Prioress of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. She immigrated to New York when she was eighteen and three years later, in 1875, entered Holy Rosary Convent, Second Street, New York City.

She was one of six sisters sent to Traverse City, Michigan, in 1877 to begin the Dominican presence in the state. After contracting pneumonia in the harsh northern Michigan climate, she returned East, where she taught at St. Boniface School in Paterson, New Jersey, for two years before being sent back to Michigan. This time she served as superior at St. Joseph Convent in Bay City until ill health struck again and she was reassigned to St. Paul Convent in Greenville, New Jersey, as superior.

In 1892, she returned to Michigan yet again, this time to replace Mother Angela Phelan as Provincial of the St. Joseph Province based in Adrian. When the community in Adrian became independent from New York in June 1923 she became the new congregation's founding Prioress.

Mother Camilla served as Prioress for only six months; she died on January 8, 1924, aged sixty-nine. During her thirty-



Adrian Dominican Archive

one years as Provincial, however, she was responsible for the founding of St. Joseph Academy and Siena Heights College (now University) in Adrian, and for the expansion of her community into more than sixty other schools, including several that were Congregation-operated, in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico.

Sources: Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, and biographical data in Adrian archive

## From Traverse City to Grand Rapids — *to Separation*

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In the fall of 1888, with Dominican sisters fanning out to schools across the Diocese of Grand Rapids and with Holy Angels Academy closing in on its first high school graduation (which came in 1889), Bishop Richter told Mother Aquinata he wanted the sisters to take on a new ministry: St. John Orphan Asylum, then under construction in Grand Rapids. With the orphanage's opening in August 1889, the Dominican Sisters had come to the city they would soon call home.

As the demand for teachers increased across the expansive Grand Rapids diocese, Mother Aquinata and Sisters Cyprian McCarron, Sabina Kavanagh, Bernard Lowell, and Agnes McCue formed a Board of Trustees for the purpose of "establishing an Institution of Learning to be located at or near the City of Grand Rapids." Pursuant to an 1855 act of the Michigan legislature having to do with incorporating such institutions of learning, it was incorporated as "The Sisters of the Order of St. Dominic of the City of Grand Rapids." The Articles of Incorporation, dated August 27, 1892, listed as their objective:

*... the Establishment and maintenance of a Seminary and Academy at or near the City of Grand Rapids in the State of Michigan and the Establishment and maintenance of Seminaries and Academies in other parts of the State of Michigan for the instruction of youth ...*

Such incorporation for the purpose of opening an educational institution was not unusual in and of itself. Indeed, the sisters in Adrian, while still a province of the Second Street convent in New York, likewise drew up articles of

incorporation for their own St. Joseph Academy and, two decades later, what was at the time called St. Joseph College (later renamed Siena Heights College, now Siena Heights University). But Murray (*U.S. Catholic Historian*, p. 67) places the impetus for Grand Rapids' step squarely on Bishop Richter:

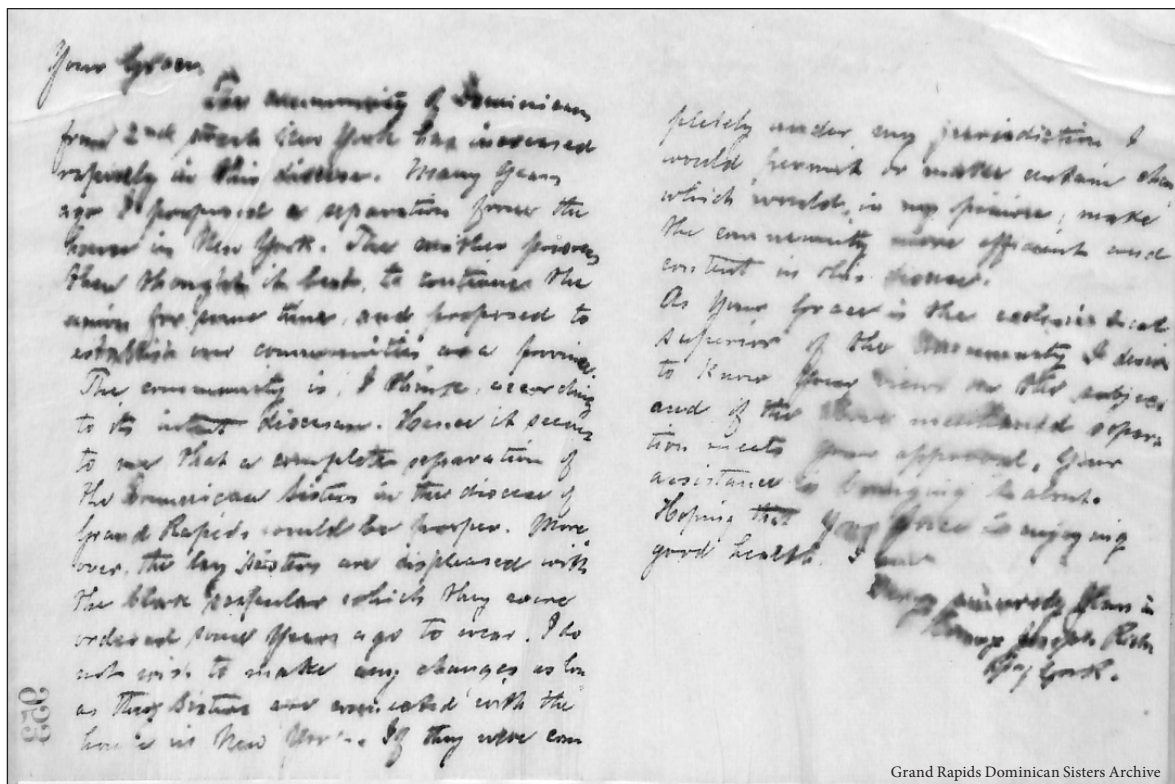
*In August 1892, Bishop Richter had "his Dominicans" legally incorporated as The Sisters of the Order of St. Dominic of the City of Grand Rapids. (If Mother Hyacinth surmised where all this was leading, she neither spoke nor recorded her thoughts on the subject.)*

Unquestionably, the need for sisters to staff the diocese's schools was growing rapidly. By these early years of the 1890s, "... Grand Rapids' Catholic population had more than doubled. Catholic schools rose from seventeen when the bishop was consecrated to forty-three within a decade. Bishop Richter became more anxious to secure a steady stream of Religious teachers for his parochial system" (Murray, *Other Waters*, p. 84, citing Sister Jane Marie Murray's unpublished 1927 manuscript, *History of the Community*, p. 75).

One step at a time, Bishop Richter was putting his plan for an independent congregation of Dominican sisters in his diocese into motion. The sisters in the Grand Rapids diocese were now their own province, and the incorporation (a civil law matter) had taken place, but the bishop's next move "needed a higher authority" (Murray, *Other Waters*, *ibid.*).

When he traveled to Rome in mid-1893 for his *ad limina* visit, his conversation with Pope

Bishop Richter's July 2, 1894, letter to Archbishop Corrigan calling for the separation from New York of the Dominican Sisters in his Grand Rapids Diocese.



Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters Archive

Leo XIII “apparently included the status of the Dominican sisters in his diocese” (Schwind, p. 51). Murray indicates in *Other Waters* (p. 84) that Bishop Richter stopped off at the Second Street convent on his way home from Rome “to consult with Mother Hyacinth.” No evidence of any consultation, however, whether in a letter or an in-person visit, can be found in the archives of either the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids or the Dominican Sisters of Hope.

What does exist in both archives is from a full year later: the bishop’s July 2, 1894, correspondence with New York Archbishop Michael Corrigan (shown above) and the archbishop’s reply shortly thereafter. After his words about how he had proposed a separation from New York “many years ago” but Mother Hyacinth had countered by suggesting a province be established instead in order to “continue the union for some time,” Bishop Richter’s letter continued:

The community is, I think, according to its intent, diocesan. Hence it seems to me that a complete separation of the Dominican Sisters in the diocese of Grand Rapids would be proper. Moreover, the lay sisters are displeased with the black scapular which they were ordered some years ago to wear. I do not wish to make any changes as long as the Sisters are connected with the house in New York. If they were completely under my jurisdiction I would permit or make certain changes which would, in my opinion, make the community more efficient and content in this diocese.

As Your Grace is the ecclesiastical superior of the community I desire to know your views on the subject, and if the above mentioned separation meets your approval, your assistance in bringing it about.

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Corrigan's reply came on July 18:

*I understand that the Dominican Sisters of New York will agree to your proposition: and the details can be easily settled by both parties.*

Mother Hyacinth seems to have asked that Bishop Richter set down his wishes in writing, as evidenced by this letter from him to her:

*Dear Mother M. Hyacinth, Prioress.*

*To comply with your wish I state that the separation of our communities of Dominican Sisters from those in New York is desirable on account of the distance, on account of their being diocesan, on account of greater facility of providing from the wants and needs growing out of circumstances of locality. I have sometimes been asked for permissions etc. which I thought reasonable but hesitated to grant on account of a fear of possibly bringing in differences between the communities in the East and the West. I would not object if you desire it, to have the communities in Michigan, for a time at least, united (August 16, 1894, diocesan archive).*

There is no archival record of any reply from Mother Hyacinth. Two weeks later, with Bishop Richter's declaration on August 30, 1894, that the community of Dominican sisters in his diocese were now an independent congregation separate from New York, Mother Aquinata became the founding Prioress of the Dominican

Sisters of Grand Rapids, known as the Congregation of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.

A week later, Bishop Richter wrote this to Mother Hyacinth:

*Dear Mother Prioress:*

*I announced the separation kindly approved by you, to the Sisters on the feast of St. Rose of Lima after the profession of four novices. I thank you from my heart for the interest you have taken in the community and for the benefit thereby done to this young diocese. I hope God will ever keep our community in the path pointed out by St. Dominic. May God ever bless you and the Sisters under your charge (September 7, 1894; diocesan archive; also see Carling, p. 61).*

The new congregation in Grand Rapids had sixty professed sisters and twelve novices, and staffed fourteen schools in the diocese. Adrian was left with eleven professed sisters who had entered in New York, nine professed sisters who had come from various locations within the Diocese of Detroit, and fifteen novices, also from within the Detroit Diocese, and staffed six schools in rural areas of Michigan and Ohio. Sisters were given the freedom to choose what to do: return to New York, stay with the Grand Rapids or Adrian communities, or be "on loan" in either Adrian or Grand Rapids until more sisters were available to serve (Schwind, p. 52, Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, p. 141).

# Mother Hyacinth Scheininger

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Mother Hyacinth was born Theresa Scheininger in Bavaria on October 22, 1835. She came to America in 1861, at the age of twenty-six, and entered the Dominican convent in Williamsburg (Brooklyn), New York, that same year. When the convent at Second Street, New York City, separated from Williamsburg in 1869, she was teaching at the school there, St. Nicholas, and became part of this new congregation.

She was the superior of St. Rose Convent in Paterson, New Jersey — the Second Street community's first mission — when Mother Augustine Neuhierl died in 1877. The community's constitution at the time stipulated that only sisters professed twelve years or more could vote, making only her and Sister Aquinata Fiegler eligible to replace Mother Augustine as Prioress General. Since an election was therefore impossible, Monsignor William Quinn, vicar general of the Archdiocese of New York and the congregation's ecclesiastical superior, declared Sister Hyacinth the new Prioress General because she had been professed longer than Sister Aquinata.

Mother Hyacinth led the congregation until her death on July 17, 1896. During her time as Prioress General, the Dominicans of Second Street, New York City, expanded their foundations not only in the East and the Midwest, but all the way West to Washington State.

Sources: Murray, *Other Waters*, and biographical data at [heritage.msmc.edu/timeline/mother-hyacinth-scheininger/](http://heritage.msmc.edu/timeline/mother-hyacinth-scheininger/), accessed 12/7/21



Adrian Dominican Archive

## A Willing Partner?

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While Bishop Richter was clearly spearheading the separation in order to bring the Dominicans in his diocese under his jurisdiction, Mother Aquinata's part in the story must be considered as well.

It is clear from both the historical record and subsequent writers on the topic that Mother Aquinata and the bishop collaborated well. Their relationship is illuminated in this passage from Kildee, pp. 62-63:

*The first year of the history of St. John's was marked by the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of Mother Aquinata's profession. In her humility she wished no display on the occasion, and asked only for a Mass of thanksgiving and the prayers of the Sisters and the orphans. But the Sisters could not let the occasion go by without doing homage to one so deserving as their good Mother.*

*... It was a big surprise that came to Mother on the morning of August twenty-sixth [1890]. The little chapel was dressed in festive attire. Everything breathed an atmosphere of peace and happiness. A Pontifical High Mass was arranged for nine o'clock. The Reverend Father McGeough, C.Ss.R., was to give the sermon. Happening to meet Mother that morning, he asked, "What shall I say about you today, Mother?" to which she replied, "Father, do not mention me but preach about the Blessed Virgin."*

*Not heeding her request, he opened his sermon by saying, "Twenty-five years ago today, a young maiden of seventeen pronounced her vows for the first time. After a struggle of twenty-five years, she is again*

*prepared to renew the same to the Right Reverend Bishop Richter."*

*At the close of the ceremony, Mother knelt at the feet of His Lordship and bound herself forever to the work of the diocese.*

A history of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids notes:

*Both Bishop [Richter] and Sister Aquinata had come from Germany in their youth, both were well-educated, disciplined personalities. ... Through the following decades [Mother Aquinata] worked very well with the Bishop, one with monastic leanings and versed in the life of scholarship. Where school matters were concerned during [the] following years, these two leaders functioned as a team in establishing and conducting the Dominican-staffed schools which eventually formed a substantial portion of the parochial system, one in which Michigan ranked fourth among states in 1926 (Heyda, p. 4).*

Furthermore, the question of independence itself was not new to Mother Aquinata. Not only had she been part of one separation already, that of the Second Street convent from the one in Williamsburg in 1869, but as superior of the Jersey City convent, she had raised the issue of separation of that foundation from Second Street. A letter dated February 5, 1879, from Mother Aquinata to Bishop Corrigan, in his capacity at that time as Bishop of Newark, outlines the situation:

*Our late Mother Prioress, the foundress of our community was a professed nun of the second Order from the Convent at Ratisbonne [sic] (Germany). She was sent*



*St. John Orphan Asylum, Grand Rapids, Michigan*

Grand Rapids Dominican Archive

*by her Bishop and superiors to establish her Order in this country. In the beginning of the foundations, however, many points of the Constitutions were not, and sometimes could not even with the best will be observed, yet it was her express will and wish that, as soon as circumstances would permit, her houses should be organized and regulated according to the Rule and Constitutions; and should she have been left to us a few years longer, she would have doubtless put her intention into execution; yet on her death bed she bade us continue and perfect the work that she had begun. And this wish of our deceased Mother, to have regular observance and discipline established in our houses, has always been my most longing desire too; this was my intention in the erection of this house, to establish a house of the second Order, in which Rule and Constitutions should be strictly observed. Yet not only for this house do I wish this, but for the other houses too. Several times have*

*I spoken on this matter to our present M. Prioress but without success. But now after the completion of this house, more anxious than ever to have things rightly settled, I sent in a petition to M. Prioress regarding the subject. ... And as each Convent according to our Constitutions, has a right to receive and profess, I asked the privilege for this house too, since it has prospered so far, to be considered a real Convent.<sup>5</sup>*

Two more letters from Mother Aquinata to Bishop Corrigan followed. One, on April 14, 1879, reminded the bishop of “the present difficult situation” and indicated that if Mother Hyacinth could not accept the proposals,<sup>6</sup> “we wish to become independent from the house in New York.” The second, on May 6, 1879, contained a further plea that the postulants at the Jersey City convent be able to receive the habit there and that one novice be able to take her vows.

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The idea of independence had its roots firmly in Dominican tradition.

*Monasteries of Dominican women were founded as strictly enclosed houses of prayer. Attaching a school to such an establishment stemmed from a Napoleonic decree requiring all convents to serve some "useful" purpose. When a monastery founded a daughter house, the constitutions specified that the "daughter" could become independent when it fulfilled the conditions of "a reliable means of support and a sufficient number for the observance of a regular life." By 1877, St. Dominic's could meet both conditions. Local girls were beginning to enter the community, and Sister Aquinata had proven herself a superb fundraiser (Murray, U.S. Catholic Historian, p. 56; citing Mariner Smith, OP, Canonical Digest, Amityville Dominican Archives).<sup>7</sup>*

Mother Aquinata may also have had her own role in the separation of her community in Grand Rapids from New York, as illuminated two years later, in 1896, in a curious series of events.

When Mother Hyacinth died in July 1896, Mother Aquinata (incidentally, without seeking Bishop Richter's permission, which she was supposed to do) traveled to New York for the funeral and the election of Mother Hyacinth's successor. That successor turned out to be Mother Aquinata herself.

*Present for the funeral and the chapter of election which followed was Mother Aquinata. If she did not fully understand the extent of her ties to the Diocese of Grand*

*Rapids, neither did the other sisters who took part in the proceedings. ... They voted, and the majority chose Mother Aquinata Fiegler as the next prioress. In second order houses it was not unheard of for a community to choose a sister from another convent to be its prioress. And Mother Aquinata had been a member of the community from her entrance in 1864 until the establishment of Grand Rapids as an independent congregation in 1894. The sisters did not understand that Bishop Richter would have to release her from the congregation in Grand Rapids (Murray, U.S. Catholic Historian, p. 70).*

Then, in a July 25, 1896, letter to Archbishop Corrigan about the matter, making it clear he did not wish to grant this release but seeking the archbishop's opinion on the situation, Bishop Richter wrote this:

*Mother Aquinata herself proposed the absolute separation of the communities. She was aware of the effects of the separation and satisfied. ...*

*Mother Hyacinth, when the separation was agreed upon, made no exception. Before the separation I asked Mother Aquinata whether it might not cripple the community and her opinion was that it would not (Schwind, p. 54).*

Almost twenty years earlier in 1877, at Mother Augustine's death, Mother Hyacinth had been selected over Mother Aquinata to become the new Prioress of the Second Street congregation. The two women were the only ones in the community who had been finally professed long enough (twelve years or longer) to be

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eligible either to vote or to become Prioress, and given that situation Monsignor William Quinn, vicar general of the Archdiocese of New York and the congregation's ecclesiastical superior, had decided that it was impossible to hold an election. If for no other reason than that Mother Hyacinth was the older in religion of the two, Monsignor Quinn appointed her as Mother Augustine's successor.

Now, in 1896, for a second time Mother Aquinata had been denied leadership of the "parent" Second Street Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary, and it had come once again at the behest of a member of the church hierarchy. In this case, Bishop Richter made it clear in his letter to Archbishop Corrigan that Mother Aquinata was too valuable to her

sisters in Grand Rapids — and, by extension, to him.

*It is much easier to fill the place in New York than to get a substitute for her here.*

...

*If Mother Aquinata is so well liked by the community in New York, you may well imagine how necessary she is to her children here. There she was the first novice, but here the foundress.*

Mother Aquinata was not released from her position as Prioress of the Grand Rapids Dominicans. The chapter delegates then held another election, which resulted in Mother Mary Hildegarde Suetholz, an American-born nun, becoming successor to Mother Hyacinth.

## Reaction to the Separation of Grand Rapids

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As news of the separation broke in Grand Rapids and Adrian on that late August day in 1894 when Bishop Richter made his announcement of it, it was not a complete surprise. Still, the reactions of the sisters ranged from sadness to confusion to anger.

*The decision was predictable. It was the way among cloistered congregations and their daughter houses. Nevertheless, the manner was arbitrary and without preparation for the majority of the sisters. The manner of separation left both groups with an unclear picture of their shared past (Schwind, p. 51).*

The sisters in Adrian felt the separation especially keenly.

*Although the separation, long surmised and planned, had already gone into effect insofar as the distribution of sisters and other preparations were concerned, the day it was officially announced was long remembered by the older Adrian members. The actual break was not accepted with quite the calmness indicated by Sister Adelaide McCue in a letter to Sister Thomasine Blum in New York, years later:*

*"Our Bishop brought about the separation very quietly, consulting Rome and Mother*

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*Prioress of Second Street, N.Y. We were notified of it in due time, and were at liberty to return to New York, as some of the sisters did."*

*Those words, written forty-three years after the event, in 1937, were objectively accurate, but they did not take account of the emotions of the severed group in the Adrian cornfield. Even though Bishop Richter acted only in the interest of the Church, there were retaliatory words from sad and angry people. Some nuns recalled the words Sister Hieronyma had addressed to the bishop, face to face, when she first heard him mention his idea in Bay City in 1890: "Yes, now that we have built the nest, you can take it."<sup>8</sup>*

*Nor was Mother Aquinata spared. There were those who felt that she had made advance preparations, and "looked too well to the ways of her house." In her position as provincial, she had placed more mature and experienced nuns in the Grand Rapids Diocese. A closer analysis of the situation at a later date clears her to a great extent, however, for all candidates from the Detroit Diocese were sent to Adrian, and no coercion was used on those from the East. There is no gainsaying [the] fact, though, that she had as provincial placed in her region the more experienced and talented nuns from the East, several of whom elected to remain in the Grand Rapids province (Ryan, *Amid the Alien Corn*, p. 140).*

But to have it finally become official was for many a sad occasion, at best. After all, sisters in the newly divided communities had ministered together — many of them as pioneers in the new mission field of Michigan, with all the

attendant hardships. The bonds between these women had long been cemented by what they had shared and suffered together.

As Ryan (*Historical Survey of the Sisters of St. Dominic, Adrian, Michigan*, p. 2) writes about the original six sisters missioned to Traverse City:

*If in departing [New York] these nuns regarded their call to Michigan as somewhat mystical, they found a hard, earthly life before them. In this band of sisters, two were destined to establish new foundations in the "peninsula of promise": Mother Mary Aquinata and Mother Mary Camilla Madden. Within a few years, sisters who had declared their vows together, who had kindled fires in the same convent, and who had given of the oil in their lamps to one another in dark, cold nights, suddenly found themselves in different congregations, severed by diocesan boundary lines.*

One history of the Adrian congregation notes:

*The three-day journey of the nuns from New York to Traverse City had been filled with inconveniences and hardships, but these were but a faint foreshadowing of the trials which attended the pioneer days in the school. In the face of almost every conceivable drawback that a convent and school could possess, the nuns opened the doors to their first six pupils, only four days after their arrival at St. Francis.*

*... The story of humble beginnings is an old, old story in religious annals. Traverse City, the first mission of the Second Street nuns in the pioneer land of the middle west, was no exception (McKeough, p. 39).*

## The Bond of Shared Hardship

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A biography of Mother Camilla details the sisters' arrival in Michigan and the extreme conditions they endured:

*At this time, travel was painfully slow and difficult. The transportation included every means of locomotion on land and water from New York to Traverse City. As they were nearing the end of their long and tiresome journey, Mother Aquinata warned them to smooth out their crumpled veils and look their best, in preparation for meeting the delegation that would await them. After performing this task to her entire satisfaction, what was their amazement upon arriving at the station to find only an old lumber wagon with a gruff driver to convey them to their future abode: the old wagon had a board across the box to serve as a seat. ... When their destination was reached, it was found to be a dilapidated old building and, worst of all, even their hopes of refreshment and rest were disappointed; the holy old missionary priest, instead of having some preparations made, said: "Sisters, rather than having you die of hunger, God will send birds to you for food." They did not wait for the birds, however; they made a fire and, happening to have some raw food, they prepared a repast consisting of potatoes, salt pork and a few crusts of dried bread. But on the following day, when the neighboring people learned of their coming, they supplied them with sufficient of the plain and homely fare to which they themselves were accustomed.*

*... [I]t required no small degree of fortitude to persevere during their first winter, in that rigorous Northern climate. The ramshackle building in which they were housed provided only a rude shelter from the biting blasts, and it was impossible to keep it heated to any degree of comfort. Long days in the classroom were succeeded by cheerless evenings in their cold barracks. On one of these bitter nights, Sister Martha [Mueglich], almost in desperation, went to the piano and struck up a lively air to which the others performed a vigorous march, in an effort to keep their blood in circulation. In the morning, the blood-stained prints of the poor little Sister's chapped fingers were seen upon the ivory keys (Ledwidge and Walsh, pp. 7-9).*

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Not every early mission involved quite such hardship as the pioneer nuns endured, of course. But no matter what, the sisters of Grand Rapids and Adrian were bonded by friendship and ministry, and the separation of the two communities broke those ties in often-painful ways.

Still, however, the ties were never forgotten.

When Sister Mary Ceslaus Pentenrider of Grand Rapids marked her golden jubilee in 1938, Mother Gerald Barry, Adrian's Prioress at the time, allowed Sister Arsenia Buchberger and at least one other sister from Adrian to be present for the celebration. Sister Ceslaus wrote to Mother Gerald:

*Just a little thank you for all the joy you have given me in permitting your dear Sisters to come for my golden jubilee. ... Sister Arsenia and I recalled so many memories of God's mercy and goodness to us in Germany, New York and Adrian.*<sup>9</sup>

The congregations' respective Prioresses over the years maintained their connection as well, and both archives contain many fond letters between them. Some were written to inform the other congregation of the death of one of the early sisters, and the other Prioress responded with her condolences, often noting the significance of the death to the congregations' shared history.

Typical of such correspondence was the one that arrived from Grand Rapids Prioress Mother Euphrasia Sullivan upon learning of the death in Adrian of Sister Pius Wagner, who had entered in Traverse City and was one of the

first postulants who came to Adrian. Mother Euphrasia wrote to her counterpart, Mother Gerald Barry:

*... I am writing to express the sincere sympathy of our community to you and your Sisters. It is sad to see these dear old Sisters in both your community and ours leaving us one by one. They seem as it were the golden links that have bound us together.*<sup>10</sup>

Many other letters were exchanged for much happier reasons, however, and often similarly became reasons for historical reflection. For example, when the Grand Rapids sisters were about to mark their seventy-fifth anniversary in 1953, their Prioress at the time, Mother Victor Flannery, wrote to invite Mother Gerald to attend the festivities. Mother Gerald wrote — in a letter addressed to “The Reverend Mother Mary Victor, O.P. and Sisters of St. Dominic” — that she would be unable to attend but that several Adrian sisters would be there. Her letter continued:

*This occasion brings to mind a host of lovely and cherished memories of our own dear Mother Camilla and your Mother Aquinata. In our hearts, as well as in yours, there is bound to well up a fountain of gratitude and admiration for the sacrifices of these pioneer Mothers who made possible this glorious day because they founded our beginnings in strong faith, in Christian hope and true Christlike charity. Because of the unity cemented in those early days, we share the joys that are yours today, and with one heart we rejoice with you, giving thanks to God who has done great things to each of us.*

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*At this time, we also mark the coming of the Dominican Sisters to Adrian and we, too, can look back on all that has gone into the making of a great community. None of us can afford to let the glamor of the present lessen the brightness of the past, from whence our spiritual riches came in the sacrificing and selfless service of those who have gone before us; those who lighted the torch with generosity, with genuineness. This will be a memorable day because of the memories it recalls, and every Adrian Dominican joins me in sincere good wishes and heartfelt congratulations.<sup>11</sup>*

As for the sisters who were directly part of the separation story, a 1921 letter written by Sisters Cyprian and Liguori McCarron speaks to the pain of personal loss. The McCarrons, two sisters by blood, were among those who ultimately chose to return to New York. In

the letter, written to their former community in Grand Rapids upon the death of Mother Gonsalva Bankstahl,<sup>12</sup> Sisters Cyprian and Liguori — the letter is signed by both but largely uses “I” and “me” pronouns — reflected upon their time in Grand Rapids and the sisters they had known and ministered with so many years earlier:

*Oh, I am so lonely to-day in thinking of that long past. My heart was certainly with the dear Nuns of the olden days!*

*... Somehow it seems we never quite leave behind the olden days, they walk beside us like shadows. Then what of the Nuns who shared our sorrows as well as rejoiced in our well-being! They are dear, very dear, to both of us and that is one reason why both of us are saddened to-day — your sorrow and loss is ours.*

## **Claiming Each Other as Sister**

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Clearly, long after the Grand Rapids congregation was severed from its New York roots — separating, in the process, sisters who had journeyed into the unknown together, had lived and ministered alongside each other, had shouldered each other’s burdens and shared each other’s joys — the losses were still being acutely felt.

And yet, the mutual heritage of the two congregations was not lost. More than a century later, the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids and of Adrian are reclaiming their shared charism, values, and geography. They recognize and celebrate what they have in common, and delight in claiming each other as Sister.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02235a.htm>. Accessed 12/7/21.

<sup>2</sup> The Dominican Sisters of Newburgh (which the Sisters of the Second Street convent became known as when the convent moved to Newburgh, New York, in 1899) and two other congregations of Dominican women merged in 1995 to form the Dominican Sisters of Hope. The Newburgh archival collection is now housed in the Dominican Sisters of Hope Archive in Ossining, New York.

<sup>3</sup> When the sisters in Adrian themselves separated from New York and became independent in 1923, the situation unfolded very differently. Mother Camilla Madden of Adrian and Mother Emmanuel Phelan of Newburgh, New York, agreed jointly to the independence and then sought the authorizations of Bishop Michael Gallagher of Detroit and Archbishop Patrick Hayes of New York. The two men readily gave their approval.

<sup>4</sup> The journal itself has long been held to belong to Mother Aquinata, but this notation is not in her handwriting.

<sup>5</sup> The letter is contained in the archives of both the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids and Dominican Sisters of Hope.

<sup>6</sup> Mother Hyacinth did not ignore Mother Aquinata's request, but she did not believe it was her place to grant it. A letter dated January 22, 1879, that she sent to a "Very Rev. Fr. Bonaventura, O.M.C.," referenced Mother Aquinata's letter to her concerning receptions and professions, and continued, "As I could not allow anything of the kind, without the advice and permission of ecclesial Superiors, I most confidently apply to you ..." and asked the priest, as the community's extraordinary confessor, to "lay these questions ... to the decision of His Eminence, the Cardinal Archbishop." At the time, this would have been New York Cardinal John McCloskey. This letter is housed in the Dominican Sisters of Hope Archive.

<sup>7</sup> St. Dominic Convent did indeed become independent, but not until 1881, becoming the Sisters of St. Dominic of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, later known as Caldwell (New Jersey) Dominican Sisters.

<sup>8</sup> Sister Hieronyma Egbert's place in the shared history of the two congregations was cemented when, in 1877, she became the bearer of the famous letter to Mother Hyacinth from the pastor in Traverse City asking for Dominicans to open a school in his parish. The interaction with Bishop Richter took place when he visited the convent in Bay City where she was missioned; although Ryan here places the date as 1890, multiple documents support Sister Hieronyma's last year in Bay City as 1888. For the 1888-1889 school year, she was transferred to a parish school in the Diocese of Detroit, and she always believed the bishop was behind her transfer out of his diocese. When the separation occurred, she chose to become part of the Adrian congregation.

<sup>9</sup> August 19, 1938.

<sup>10</sup> February 24, 1944.

<sup>11</sup> July 22, 1953.

<sup>12</sup> Mother Gonsalva served as Prioress of the Grand Rapids Dominicans from 1915 until resigning for health reasons in 1919 not long after being elected to a second term.

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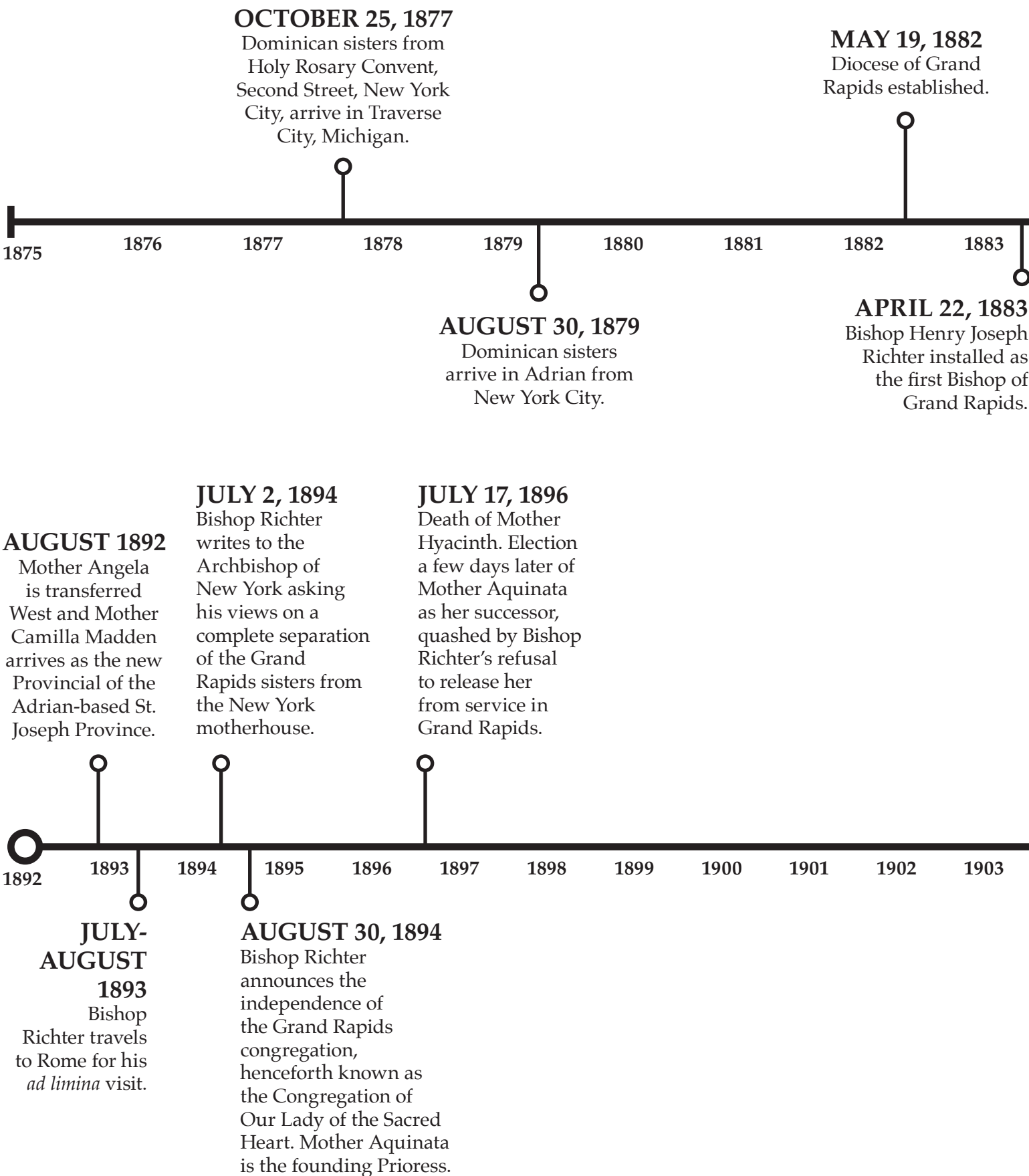
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– **Arlene Bachanov**, Writer/Researcher,  
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# TIMELINE OF EVENTS



**SEPTEMBER 9, 1883**

Bishop Richter dedicates Holy Angels Academy, Traverse City.

**AUGUST 1885**

The Dominican houses in Michigan become the Province of St. Joseph of the Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary, with the provincial house at Holy Angels Academy. Mother Aquinata is named the Provincial.

**AUGUST 2, 1891**

Mother Angela Phelan and a postulant arrive in Adrian from Traverse City. Mother Angela becomes the first Provincial of a new province in Adrian, also called St. Joseph.



1884

1885

1886

1887

1888

1889

1890

1891

1892

**MAY 20, 1884**

St. Joseph Hospital and Home for the Aged opens in Adrian.

**AUGUST 1889**

St. John Orphan Asylum opens in Grand Rapids, becoming the St. Joseph provincial house.

**JUNE 27, 1923**

The Adrian congregation becomes independent from New York, with the name Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary. Mother Camilla becomes the founding Prioress.

**MAY 1, 1915**

Death of Mother Aquinata.



1904

1914

1924

1925

**DECEMBER 26, 1916**

Death of Bishop Richter.

**JANUARY 8, 1924**

Death of Mother Camilla.



**Dominican Sisters**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Emboldened by faith, serving with joy*



**Adrian Dominican Sisters**  
Seek Truth • Make Peace • Reverence Life

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