

REVEREND MOTHER MODWINA

“We like her!” chorused the little children happily as the convent door closed behind the tiny form of Reverend Mother Modwina. “Why do you like her?” asked the tall Sister in charge. “Because she’s small like us,” came the decisive answer.



Yes, her littleness, not merely in physical size, but in her lowly estimation of herself, was the secret of this nun’s power over human hearts. It was this lovely quality of humility that made her a perfect instrument in the hands of God to carry His teaching to the hearts of little ones thousands of miles away from the land of her birth. She was chosen by God for a noble work—to lead the members of her Congregation, the Daughters of Mary and Joseph,- to enter an entirely new field of apostolic endeavor in the United States of America,-- to leave the well-established traditions of their European convents and to begin anew in a strange land.

Born on October 6, 1881, in the pleasant town of Listowel by the winding banks of the River Feale in County Kerry, Ireland, Elizabeth O’Driscoll was brought up in the best traditions of an Irish Catholic family. She was the youngest of eleven children. Seven boys and three girls had already preceded her into this happy family.

One little sister remained only for a short time on this earth, so Elizabeth grew up in a family of ten. Being the youngest and the smallest, she was the favorite child. She, herself, said that she was rather spoiled, but there is little reason to believe this as her good parents, Jeremiah and Catherine O’Driscoll, did not believe in pampering their children. Her father, a public accountant, trained his little daughter to assist him in adding long columns of figures, and she acquired facility in doing this which later never failed to astonish the pupils of her arithmetic classes.

The brothers and sisters of this large family were deeply devoted to each other. The bonds of affection formed in childhood’s happy days grew stronger with the passing years, and remained with them even when the members scattered through four continents: Europe, Africa, America and Australia.

Elizabeth was especially devoted to her sister Kitt, who was separated from her in age by only thirteen months. It was with this little sister that she began her early training at the Presentation Convent in Listowel. She was a very happy child at school, and she grew to love the Presentation Sisters dearly. In addition to her regular studies, she took music and drawing, and became very skillful in the latter accomplishment.

Her love for Our Divine Lord was remarkable even at this early age. From the time of her First Holy Communion she made the Nine Fridays faithfully every month. Cold winter mornings, rain, hail, or

snow—nothing could keep her from practicing this favorite devotion. She loved her dear Lord too much to disappoint Him.

When her elementary schooling was completed in Listowel, she enrolled in Coloma Secondary School, Croydon, England. There, for five years, she was taught by those beloved blue-scapulared Sisters, the Ladies of Mary, whose community she was later to join. She made many lasting friendships in Coloma. Especially dear to her was Reverend Mother Felicie, who had a profound influence in directing her towards the religious life.

She returned home each summer to spend the vacation in Ireland. Much of this time was spent at a pleasant seaside resort, Ballybunion, where her mother and Kitt were her daily companions. The two young girls looked forward very much to these seaside visits, for Ballybunion was a happy and attractive place. Elizabeth spent part of her holiday time at her favorite hobbies: crocheting and knitting. She did beautiful needlework and her centerpieces and doilies were admired by all who saw them. Very few families were fortunate enough to possess a sewing machine in those days. Elizabeth, therefore, allowed her friends and neighbors to benefit by hers. She often brought home pieces of sewing for them, and returned the finished article before long, having done it all herself.

Each year, before her return to school, her parents gave a party for her. She enjoyed this very much, as she was naturally light-hearted and cheerful, and loved to dance. She played, too, and no party was ever complete without a few tunes from Elizabeth on the concertina.

In 1904, she approached her parents with her big request. Not at all to their surprise, she asked their permission to enter the convent. Good Christian parents as they were, they heartily approved, though it was no small sorrow for them to part with their beloved youngest child. She returned to Coloma where she remained for a time as a postulant. Then she went to the Mother House, another Coloma, in Malines, Belgium, where she made her novitiate under the wise and vigilant guidance of the Novice Mistress, Mother Adelaide. During her novitiate she was visited by her sister Kitt and her brother Michael, who was then on vacation from his post as Chief of Police in South Africa. They found her very happy and content in her convent life.

Her mother died about this time, but her devoted father had the privilege of being present at his little daughter's religious profession. On this great day of her life, Elizabeth, now Mother Modwina, pledged herself to Jesus Christ forever by her vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. The sacrifice then made was never taken back. She lived in the spirit of these vows to the day of her death.

Mother Modwina returned to Coloma, Croydon, immediately after her profession in 1907. There she enrolled in its newly formed Froebel Training College to prepare for the teaching profession. She was the only nun among the students. She readily won their respect and admiration, for they could see in her the pattern of the perfect religious. She used her artistic talents to help them in their art work, especially clay modeling, at which she excelled. She studied very hard herself, and helped her companions with their studies whenever possible.

It was during this time that her beloved superior, Reverend Mother Felicie, became seriously ill. It was Mother Modwina's privilege then to nurse her, and in her tender devotedness to this invalid nun, she tried to pay back in part the debt of gratitude which she owed to her spiritual mother. From this time on, Mother Modwina showed a marked efficiency for the care of the sick. She studied physiology, anatomy, and first aid, and was successful in obtaining a diploma in home nursing. Throughout her life, her great pleasure was to assist and care for the sick by every means within her power.

Soon, however, she was in great need of physical care herself. In 1910 she was transferred from Croydon to the newly-opened school of St. Anne's in Sanderstead. Here she developed very painful ulcers of the eye and for a long time was not able to see properly. During the winter months she suffered from severe rheumatism, and was not even able to bend sufficiently to put on her shoes. At this time, also, she had several attacks of pneumonia which left her lungs weak, and consequently, she developed tuberculosis. This resulted in several hemorrhages before it could finally be checked.

During her stay in Sanderstead, which was from 1910 to her departure for America in 1926, it could be said of her that she suffered from the sole of her foot to the crown of her head,--from those feet which were perpetually painful because they were allergic to leather,--to those ulcerated eyes which were a veritable martyrdom for more than half her life. The doctor said that he had never seen anything like her capacity for suffering. Reverend Mother Adeline used to visit her in the dark room to which she was confined because of her painful eyes. She asked how she could bear the suffering so patiently.

Mother Modwina replied very gently: "I always think that this cannot be as bad as Our Lord's crown of thorns." Despite the many weary hours and days of suffering, she managed to accomplish a great deal of work while at Sanderstead. She was successively: sacristan, first assistant, infirmarian, and during the war years (1914-1918) she was bursar. What a task this must have been in those years of food shortage and rationing. While taking care of all these household duties, she also taught in the Preparatory School, and later became its headmistress. She greatly endeared herself to the children who remembered her for years afterwards, and often talked of the wonderful stories she used to tell them. The children and their parents, indeed everyone with whom she came in contact, admired her for her straight-forward, direct manner of approach, for her sincerity, and for her undeniable goodness. She was kind to everyone, but especially to the poor. In her position as econome, she had many opportunities of doing good to others, especially to those less favored by fortune.

Archbishop Cantwell of Los Angeles, when visiting Belgium in 1925, called at the Mother House in Brussels to ask Reverend Mother General Lutgarde for a staff of teaching Sisters for the new parochial school which would open in Culver City the next year.

Although she was not at first inclined to grant the request, she finally agreed and sent Reverend Mother Constance and Mother Marie Madeleine (now Superior General) to visit Culver City to judge the possibilities of a foundation. They returned to Belgium favorably impressed, and during the next year, preparations were made for sending the first contingent of Sisters to America.

After careful consideration, Reverend Mother General chose Mother Modwina to lead this little band of pioneers into this faraway land. For her, it was a heroic task. The whole burden of the responsibility

rested on her shoulders, and the success of the enterprise, then and in after years, was dependent on the magnificent response which she made to this new call of Christ.

In July, 1926, she left her dear St. Anne's to go to Belgium, there to be formally entrusted with her charge. The leave-taking with her superior, Reverend Mother Elise, to whom she was deeply attached, and with her dear Sisters, was both touching and painful. But, resolutely, for the love of her Divine Master, she broke these religious ties which were so dear to her, and said goodbye to them and to this fair land of England which had always been a second home to her.

She travelled to Belgium with Mother Frederica who was to be one of her co-workers in America. In the retreat, which followed at the Mother House, she was spiritually refreshed and prepared for the great task ahead. Five others came to join her there, and soon all was in order for them to travel. And so, the Mother House witnessed the first of those departure scenes for foreign lands which fill the heart with joy at the thought of new conquests for Christ, and the eyes with tears for those who, perhaps, will never again return to their native land.

The little community, which set out so bravely on that August day from Antwerp, numbered only seven. Time would prove that hardly half that number were physically capable of doing the strenuous work that awaited them in America. One Sister fell ill soon after her arrival, and had to spend several months in the hospital before she was well enough to return to England. Another returned to Belgium within two years, and two more shortly thereafter. However, though frail in body, they were strong in spirit and eager to do great things for Christ in their new home.

At times, the heart of the little Superior must have trembled at the thought of the unknown work awaiting her. She had never been to America, knew nothing at all of the American system of education, and did not even know what kind of school she was to conduct. She was greatly cheered at Southhampton when she was handed a box containing roses sent by Reverend Mother Elise from Sanderstead. One of these she kept until her death, a perfect souvenir of a friendship which brought her much consolation during her years of exile.

However, despite the heaviness of her heart, she enjoyed the journey with her Sisters who were full of fun and good spirits. At New York, she had the pleasure of meeting her sister Kitt and of seeing, for the first time, her little niece, Ina. Dear though her relatives were to her, she did not delay long with them, but pressed on to California where God's work was waiting to be done. As they crossed the vast stretches of the United States, they marveled at the wealth and magnificence of the land to which they had come. Still more, were they impressed by nature's prodigal beauty as their train carried them swiftly towards Los Angeles.

Hospitable parishioners of St. Augustine's and their pastor, Father John O'Donnell, were waiting to welcome the newcomers to Culver City. The Sisters found their little convent all in order for their arrival. The beds were made and a hot meal was waiting for them. When the last kind friend had departed, they looked around their little home. It was ample for their needs but, alas, very

inadequately furnished. True, they had each a bed to sleep in, but when they unpacked their bags, there was no place at all to put their few belongings. Chairs, also, were sadly lacking. Orange crates proved to be fairly convenient, as lockers and seats until they could find something better.

There was little time for worry about household conveniences. School was due to open in less than two weeks and much had to be learned before the opening day. Reverend Mother Modwina wisely went to seek information where she could find it best—at the nearest convent. The Holy Name Sisters at St. Clement's, Ocean Park, were very kind and helpful to Reverend Mother Modwina and her little band. They explained, as thoroughly as they could in such a limited time, the exact nature of the course of study which the Sisters were to teach. Reverend Mother Modwina always spoke with gratitude of these good Sisters, and she never tired of saying how much she and her Sisters were indebted to them for their kindness in those early, difficult days.

St. Augustine's School was a picture of neatness as it opened its doors for the first time to receive pupils in September, 1926. It was a low stucco building which had previously been a parish hall, but was now divided lengthwise by a long corridor on to which opened four large classrooms. On that memorable first day, the Sisters closely scanned the faces of their new charges to find out something of the type of child with which they were to deal. It did not take them very long to discover that the material which they were to mold into good, law-abiding American citizens was not too pliable, to say the least.

Most of the children came in from public schools. Their work habits and their manners left a great deal to be desired. They had no previous contact with Sisters, and at first, were inclined to take advantage of the gentleness and refinement of their new teachers.

It must be remembered that two of these teachers, Reverend Mother Modwina and her assistant, were accustomed to teaching in girls' private schools in England, the senior teacher had experience only in Belgian girls' academies, and the two youngest had no teaching experience whatsoever. Besides, each Sister had to manage two grades in one room. It is not to be wondered at that the first year was hard, while the Sisters were becoming accustomed to their new pupils and their ways. Yet Reverend Mother Modwina always looked back on that year as being one of the happiest of her life. She often talked of all the fun and laughter she and the other Sisters had in their little convent garden, and how the pastor would gently scold them for sitting out in the cool evening hours when the fog came rolling in from the sea. "You'll find it's bad for your health," he would tell them. They did find, in after years, that the evening drop in temperature was something to be reckoned with in California, but at that time, they were too inexperienced to realize the harm it might do them.

There were many other things to learn in the next few years. But very soon, it was apparent that the school was progressing marvelously well under the Sisters' care. New Sisters arrived from Europe to help in the work, and Reverend Mother Modwina, ever anxious to do something more for Christian education, was looking for another place where her apostolic zeal could be poured out for the benefit of souls.

In 1930, she received an invitation to take charge of a school which was to be opened in San Francisco for the purpose of training Japanese children with an ultimate view of converting them to the faith. The pastor of the Japanese Mission assured her that the new school was built and ready for occupation. It would accommodate three hundred pupils, all of whom were sure to be converted to Catholicism in a very short time. The plan was put before Reverend Mother General Andre who gladly accepted this new mission field and promised to send four Sisters to staff the school. Reverend Mother Modwina was chosen to lead the little band of pioneers to begin the new foundation.

On July 31, 1930, the courageous four set out from Culver City. Little did they realize then the many difficulties, disappointments, and misunderstandings that were to meet them in this strange new mission. It was there, perhaps, more than in any other place, that the heroic virtue of Reverend Mother Modwina was to be revealed in all its true strength. There, during the next seven and a half years, she was to be severely tried by a number of crosses and trials, some of which were apparent even from the day of her arrival in San Francisco.

To begin with, the house in which the Sisters were to live had once been a fine mansion, but at this time it was exceedingly dirty and ill-kept. Consequently, the Sisters had to spend every spare moment in scrubbing floors, painting walls, and doing everything possible to make the place livable.

This was only a minor difficulty, however, compared with those which were to follow. The pastor of the mission, a priest who had spent many years in Japan, failed to make the situation clear to Reverend Mother Modwina. Probably, he believed that if he did so, the Sisters might not stay to work out his project.

The Sisters thought they had come to teach in a parochial school as they were doing in Culver City. The pastor had the same intention in mind, but years of dealing with the Japanese had made him over-cautious and conciliatory. He found himself pulled two ways at once, and he tried to please both parties.

The pagan Japanese had contributed in a small way to the erection of the school and hall. The hall they intended for their social gatherings. The school, according to their plans, was to be used as an institution where their children would study the Japanese language and customs each day after their regular classes in the public schools. When they understood that the pastor meant to conduct a regular Catholic parochial school in the building, they withdrew their support entirely. The public schools were ideal for their children. They would still allow them to attend Morning Star Nursery and Kindergarten in the little bungalow behind the convent under the Supervision of Mother X, a member another Congregation. The Sisters of her Congregation do not teach in parochial schools, and it was because of this reason that the pastor had invited the Daughters of Mary and Joseph to teach in his school. He did not dismiss Mother X and her Sisters, nor did he tell Reverend Mother Modwina that both groups of Sisters would work in the same small school. One can readily imagine the confusion that arose and the consequent misunderstanding by all parties.

Moreover, the Japanese children dearly loved Mother X and they and their parents did not want to have anything to do with the new Sisters. Mother X had been with them for seventeen years. She took

care of the little ones, taught needlework to the older girls, and gave religious instruction each Sunday to the few Catholic children. Obviously, there was no need for another group of Sisters since the pagans would allow their children to attend the new school only for Japanese every afternoon.

Reverend Mother Modwina had to find out the truth of the situation by herself. Always the model of courtesy and refinement in her dealings with others, she now acted with the utmost caution and patience. When the school opened on

August 11, instead of the expected 300, only fifteen arrived. In the Kindergarten, sixty were present with Mother X. Nothing daunted, Reverend Mother Modwina and her Sisters set to work to teach their little handful with all the vivacity and enthusiasm that they would have given to the promised multitude.

Outwardly calm and self-possessed, Reverend Mother must have wondered in her heart if the Lord wanted them here where they were so unwanted. She knew of the many arguments that went on among the Japanese concerning the Sisters. Gradually, after almost a year of debate on the part of the pagans, and earnest prayer offered up by the Sisters, the situation remedied itself.

The few Catholic families continued to send their children to the Daughters of Mary and Joseph for their entire schooling, and the more broadminded of the pagans began to do the same. It was also decided in a most amicable way that Mother X would give up her connection with the school, and would limit her contact with the Japanese to religious instruction of the still unreconciled at her own convent.

Even when this first year, so fraught with difficulty and misunderstanding, was over, Reverend Mother Modwina had still much with which to contend. It was not easy to gain the confidence of these Oriental children, so different in mentality and background from the Western child. Their parents were most exacting, and though the Sisters took the utmost care in the training of the children, they criticized where there was no fault to find. But since the Truth will cry out and reveal itself, soon it became evident to all that their children were receiving a better education at Morning Star School than they would get elsewhere. More little ones came to swell its numbers, and since the religion taught by the sisters made the children "good and obedient," the parents gradually gave permission to have them baptized.

To prepare a child for Baptism is no small joy. To lead a pagan child to the sacred font, to see him soon followed by his brothers and sisters, even his parents, was a joy that often came the way of reverend Mother Modwina. No amount of trouble was too much for her when it came to preparing these little ones for the Sacraments. It was a delight to see her surrounded by a little group eagerly listening to her last words of instruction before they were made children of god.

There were, to be sure, language difficulties both with parents and children, but her kindly way spoke a language of the heart which always succeeded in drawing these people very close to her. When the call came in January, 1938, for her to go to the new school in Westwood, it was indeed with sad hearts that they saw her leave the Mission. They knew now what she meant when she said in 1930: "We will give

you our best.” She had lived up to her promise, and, furthermore, she had inspired many more Daughters of Mary and Joseph to love and cherish this work, hard as it was, which was always so dear to her heart.

She returned to Los Angeles as superior of the newly-opened convent of St. Paul the Apostle Convent in the lovely little village of Westwood. The school of which she then became principal had been in existence since 1935. Now the original little bungalows were replaced by a beautiful new school building in Spanish mission architecture, with all its classrooms opening on to a patio ablaze with flowers.

The children with which she had to work in Westwood were quite different from those of Culver City and San Francisco who came from families of moderate or less than average means. Here the children belonged to the professional or leisured class of people, and consequently required a different approach and an understanding sympathy with their problems. Reverend Mother Modwina, like the great apostle patron of the school, knew how to make herself “all things to all men.” Soon she won the affection of these little children, as she had done with those in Culver City and San Francisco. Many of them will remember her as their fourth grade teacher: strict but very kind, uncompromising with wrong-doing, but ready to sympathize with them in their smallest sorrows. All of them will remember her as their principal, the tiny, fragile nun who could win unquestioning obedience from boys and girls many inches above her, as easily as from the little tots. She was ever ready and willing to listen to them, and even though she had to reprimand them at times, she let them understand this was only to make them better, to lead them on to higher and nobler ideals.

The children’s parents loved her for her kindness and impartiality. Often they remarked: “She is a perfect lady.” She knew very well how to win the hearts of parents. She knew that nothing was dearer to them than their children, and when they came to her sometimes to complain, she quietly and gently let them pour their hearts out to her. Then she would show them where they were wrong. She would suggest remedies by which the situation might be improved. No one ever left her presence without being consoled and strengthened to take up life’s burden and go on bravely. Many came to talk to her of their own personal troubles because they saw in her more than a school principal. They saw in her the true mother who could take all, the old as well as the young, the bad as well as the good, into her tender loving heart.

Life in Westwood was not without its problems. First, there was the difficulty in adjustment. The Fathers in charge had their own ideas as to how a school should be managed, and it required a great deal of tact and patience on the part of Reverend Mother not to come into open conflict with them regarding certain points on which she and they disagreed. With time and patient waiting, even these difficulties were ironed out, and a mutual agreement was reached which was most satisfactory to both parties. Yet, despite the friction which there undoubtedly was, Reverend Mother always spoke very highly of the priests and never allowed a word of criticism to be spoken about them. It was just another case of where well-meaning people, in their anxiety to do a good work well, run counter in their opinions to each other.

All lesser trials gave way before the great one which faced Reverend Mother Modwina and her Sisters in May, 1940. In that dread month, the advancing Nazi armies overran Belgium. As a consequence, the Sisters in America were completely cut off from their Mother House in Brussels. This was a great sorrow to the loving heart of Reverend Mother Modwina. She loved her Institute deeply and venerated the opinions and advice of her superior General. Now she was all alone. Whatever decisions had to be made must be made by her in councils with other superiors in America. Until the liberation of Belgium in 1945, only brief messages came from the Mother House, but there was no transaction of business whatsoever.

Soon the need for more Sisters became urgent. Small groups had come nearly every year from the Mother House or from England to increase the number of workers, but with the invasion of Belgium, even the two that were destined to sail in 1940 were unable to come. The number of children in the schools continued to increase, so finally Reverend Mother decided to put into operation a plan that had been formulated several years previously: the establishment of an American novitiate.

The first problem was to secure the proper ecclesiastical permission for this project. It could be obtained only from Rome, but all communication was cut off from the Holy City. Prayer alone could overcome this insurmountable obstacle, and so for a year the Sisters prayed earnestly and perseveringly. Finally, to their great joy, word was received from the Chancery Office that the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, D.C. had obtained the required permission by radiogram from Vatican City on July 28, 1943.

The next big problem was to find a suitable location for the new novitiate. The only way was to go out and look for one, and for another weary year, Reverend Mother, in company with one of her Sisters and a devoted friend to drive them, searched through the surrounding districts, street by street, for a property whereon to establish this project so dear to her heart.

At last, when nothing better seemed available, she bought a little house across the street from St. Paul the Apostle Convent. It was not adequate, but it was the best she could do at the time. But soon it seemed to be the worst possible step to have taken, for the tenants absolutely refused to move out and they had secured a government permission to remain there as long as the housing shortage continued. Imagine Reverend Mother's grief on seeing her little house, "Nazareth," across the street, and being unable to move into it. Imagine her anxiety on knowing that she had put practically every penny the community possessed into its purchase, thus crippling themselves entirely for any further development.

Despite this terrific disadvantage, the work of the novitiate grew apace. The first postulants entered at St. Paul the Apostle Convent on September 25, 1943, and began their training in the religious life. Such a beginning was naturally very hard, both for the professed Sisters and the postulants. The convent was even too small for the professed Sisters in those days. Nevertheless, certain rooms were set aside exclusively for the novitiate, and the community had to get along as best they could in the rest. This sacrifice of convenience was made most cheerfully, and God, in His own good time, gave the reward.

Reverend Mother Modwina, gallant little traveler that she was, continued to look for another house, but with far less confidence, for now she was without the means to buy, even if she found something suitable. "Nazareth" was for sale, but nobody wanted to buy it because of the obstinate tenants who refused to move out.

But Providence who guides all things aright was leading Reverend Mother to a place much better suited to her purpose than "Nazareth." In a chance conversation with a parent who came to register her child for September, 1944, she learned of a fine property in Brentwood, which had just been put up for sale. She expressed a desire to see it, and the lady, Mrs. Ruth Mahoney, very kindly took her there. It was all that any superior could desire: a large, well-built house of Italian Renaissance style, delightful, spacious grounds with magnificent trees to give privacy and shade, and a lovely inner garden where she planned to erect a shrine to Our Lady.

Negotiations were begun immediately. To her delight, Reverend Mother found that she could buy the house for a reasonable sum. The problem was: where to find the money.

Her trust in God was complete. He guided her along difficult paths where anyone less trusting in His goodness would have faltered and failed. She went ahead with her plans, trusting to the good Lord to find a way out. And He did. Quite unexpectedly, a buyer was found for "Nazareth," who took it upon herself to oust the unwilling tenants. Thus, the little house across the street parted from the Sisters before they had a chance to use it.

The Novitiate property was purchased in September, 1944. A few months sufficed to make all the necessary repairs, the landscaping of the garden, and the alterations necessary to render it a suitable dwelling for its young inhabitants. The largest room in the house was converted into a chapel. Everything in it was donated by generous friends in San Francisco and Culver City. A beautiful statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, patroness of the Novitiate, was given by the children of St. Paul the Apostle School.

Everything was in readiness for the happy novices and their Mother when they arrived to take possession of their new home on November 1, 1944. Thus was fulfilled one of the dearest wishes of Reverend Mother Modwina. For years she had hoped and prayed for this great day and at last it had come. Truly her heart was glad and one could see the look of satisfaction on her face as she walked around the novitiate garden or talked to the assembled novices on her frequent visits there.

The next year, 1945, brought the unspeakable joy of union once again with our dear Mother House. Letters were exchanged at last, and Reverend Mother General learned with satisfaction of the progress that had been made in America during the war years. She promised to send Sisters as soon as possible. The work was still growing and the novices would not be able to help for several years.

All during those frightful years of waiting for hostilities to cease, the Sisters had remained in good health, and fortunately so, for if one had collapsed, there was no one to replace her. Now, with help so close at hand, their tired human frames gave way. To her great sorrow, Reverend Mother saw two of her dear Sisters at Westwood fall suddenly and seriously ill. It was an added cross which was hard for her motherly heart to bear. When her Sisters suffered, she sympathized so thoroughly that she seemed

to suffer with them. Her own health was always precarious, but she forgot herself to spend long hours by their bedsides, watching with them and offering words of consolation which only she could give.

The spring of 1946 brought several new Sisters from England, and the gaps left by the invalids were filled. In this year, too, a general chapter was held at the Mother House. Reverend Mother Modwina was eligible to go. Her heart must have thrilled at the thought of seeing the Mother House, her Superior General, and her old friends in Europe once more. But this joy was not to be. Her doctor decided that travel by air (which was the only possible way at the time) would be dangerous for her heart, which was even then in a critical condition. She accepted his decision very humbly and another Sister was elected in her stead.

This Sister, with the other American delegates, was entrusted with the task of making one more determined effort at opening a recruiting house in Ireland. For years, the Sisters had tried in vain to get a place in this country so fruitful of vocations. Now they realized more than ever that the novitiates in England and America would not suffice to give all the workers needed for the ever-increasing scope of their education activities.

Unceasing prayer went up to Our Divine Lord and His Holy Mother for help to realize this important project. Again the hand of Providence was visibly guiding the Sisters. Two of the delegates returned to California because the school year was about to begin. The third, Reverend Mother Mary Francis, seizing a chance opportunity, went to see a property which was for sale in County Longford. A small down payment could be made to secure the property, but this would be of no use without the permission of the Bishop to establish a novitiate there. For weeks she waited to see him. Finally she had a short interview, but got no satisfactory answer. At last, the Bishop reluctantly gave permission, and a juniorate and novitiate were opened there the following year.

Reverend Mother Modwina was overjoyed at the prospect of this new establishment. That was all she had to ask from the Lord. Now the last of her wishes for her beloved Institute were fulfilled. She had received her canonical transfer at the chapter meeting, and once again, she set out for San Francisco. One could say that all her house was set in order: the American novitiate was prospering, the Irish foundation was assured, and its first aspirants had gone to England to begin their training.

The little school in San Francisco to which she returned in October, 1946, was the same in appearance, but very different in its pupils. All the Japanese had been evacuated from the Pacific Coast in 1942, and only a few had returned to San Francisco in 1946. Children of all races and nationalities had taken their place at Morning Star School. Reverend Mother soon made herself at home with these little ones, and learned to love them despite their different colors, temperaments, and training.

She was not able to teach very much because her health was failing visibly. During the supposed air raid on Los Angeles in 1942 she had felt the first attack of the heart ailment which was to carry her to the grave. As the months went by, the pain became worse—at times almost unbearable—but she never complained. Often she seemed to go down into the valley of death, and her life was despaired of, but her strong spirit and her desire to be of service kept her alive. If she could not help in the classroom, she could make herself useful to the community in many other ways. She took it upon

herself to be the cook, and while the Sisters were busy in school, she prepared appetizing meals for them, and even washed the dishes when they had gone back to class.

October 6, 1947 was her sixty-sixth birthday. She seemed to be a little more tired than usual, yet she was as bright and cheerful as ever. In a day or two her condition became worse. There was yet apparently no cause for alarm, but the Sisters would run no risk. They persuaded Reverend Mother to let them call the doctor. He said her heart was in poor condition, and arranged to have her checked at St. Mary's Hospital the following Tuesday. It was now Friday. He assured the Sisters that the situation was not serious, so reverend Mother stayed up that evening and attended a meeting of friends who were putting on a bazaar for the benefit of the Sisters' Irish project. She laughed heartily at some of their plans for making money. She went to bed as usual: peaceful, happy and serene.

During the night one of the Sisters went in to see how she was. She whispered, "I wonder if Sister Mary Philomena is all right. I hear her moaning in her sleep." These were her last spoken words on earth—words of thoughtfulness for the needs of others, words of solicitude from the great mother-heart for her children whom she loved so dearly.

The next morning she did not arise for Mass. This did not cause alarm, as the doctor had advised her to stay in bed for a few days. When Mass was over, one of the Sisters went to ask her what she would like for breakfast. She found her apparently asleep, but on going nearer, she found that the Angel of Death had come for her during the night. Her soul had gone before its Maker while the world was wrapped in sleep.

The little community was grief stricken, but they could not fail to see that even in death, God had granted His faithful spouse her final wish. She always wanted to die quietly, without disturbing anyone. She did not want to live to be a burden to her Sisters, for they had so much to do, she said. And so, the Master came for her when her work was done, when she had brought her Sisters through their hard years of pioneer work, and had established them so well that they could go on and work in peace and confidence at their appointed tasks.

She died on Saturday, October 11, the Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. What more fitting day to die for one who was ever a true mother to her children, who loved them all with a generous and self-sacrificing love, who watched and prayed beside them in their hours of sickness, who wiped away the tears when sorrow came their way.

Reverend Mother General wrote the following beautiful tribute when she heard the sad news:

What a beautiful and happy death, like a sleep on the Heart of God; an imperceptible flight toward the eternal dwelling-places. She was always a truly Christ-like religious and a worthy daughter of our Venerated Founder...In Heaven her recompense will be very great...I was so happy to have seen her recently, and to have spent three happy

weeks with her in the midst of her little community. I learned to know her better, and I carried away from my visit an unforgettable souvenir. Her death was truly the death of the just, the enfolding of a child in the arms of its father.

She was buried from the little Chapel of St. Francis Xavier attached to the Japanese Mission. As they took her mortal remains from the convent, the children of the school formed a double guard of honor for the little Mother whom they loved so well. They were strangely quiet standing there in the morning sunlight, grief and regret showing on their little black, brown and yellow faces. A few of them managed to squeeze into one of the priests' cars, and so were present when they lowered her body into the ground in Holy Cross Cemetery outside of San Francisco. Her own religious family was there, too, their heart sorrowing for a beloved mother who had gone from them forever. Her grave lies in a green slope on a low hill facing the Pacific Ocean. "I want to lay my bones beside the Pacific," she used to say, and because she gave Him all, God would not refuse her this last desire.

Yes, she has gone from us in body, but not in spirit. No longer can we see her dear face, prematurely aged with weight of care and suffering. But her spirit lives on to brighten the hearts of all those who knew and loved her. Some days we can see her again, hurrying down the corridor of the old school in Culver City, or we can watch her tend the flowers in the beautiful Westwood patio garden, or we can catch a glimpse of her as she mounts the steep stairway to her little class in Morning Star School.

Little Mother, may we learn from the lesson of true devotedness, that whether we speak with strangers, or teach in a classroom, or cook the meals, or tend the sick, we can do it all for the Master Who called us here to work for Him. Your work in California continues to grow. New schools are added each year, new Sisters come to help us, and children in the thousands depend on us for guidance and care.

Oh, from your place in Heaven, obtain for us that we may always live according to the lessons which you taught us, that the spirit of Christ-like charity and apostolic zeal which you brought with you to California and left as a spiritual legacy to your children, may continue to burn brightly in our lamps as wise virgins, until we, too, are called home to Heaven. Then, may we go out quietly to meet the Bridegroom as you did, our hands full of merits, because we, like you, have left all to find All, Christ Jesus, Our Lord.