

Blandina, A Woman for Our Times: February 3, 2019, Reflection

In *Heartnotes* I wrote: S. Blandina, Servant of God, provides us a strong model of the ways to risk a caring response in our time. Whenever she saw a need, she found a way to respond, many times quite creatively. These point a way for us to respond like her, no matter what our age, from youth onward, wherever Providence places us.

What I'm going to share today are just examples of the ways we are following Blandina today to "Do whatever presents itself." Finally, I'll need you later to fill in the many, many other Charity responses that time prevents me from including, those who like Blandina, dare to risk a caring response. So the plan is that after I finish, we have a 1-minute stand up stretch and then gather in groups of 3 or so to fill in all the other examples I couldn't possibly include.

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Blandina has the title Servant of God, and I think she would love it because that certainly was who she tried to be. Her two mottos, both of them, speak clearly to this title:

"Do whatever presents itself and never omit anything because of hardship or repugnance" and another motto was St. Vincent's exhortation: "Let us give ourselves to God to do whatever he pleases with us." And she faithfully followed those mottos for her times.

As an immigrant herself who came to our country with her family amid poverty, without speaking English, Blandina could feel deeply what other immigrants were going through. Not only in Cincinnati where her family had to struggle at first, but also later in the West where the Native Americans, here for centuries, were treated like immigrants as well as many of the wealthy, educated Hispanic people when the US Army took over, for example.

Later, in Cincinnati we know the many ways she worked to make the immigrants feel

comfortable in their new country. Sometimes we don't realize that before she and Justina started Santa Maria, she had tried to open a school at the Archbishop's suggestion, but she was given a room in the basement of the school that already existed, and even though she went door to door, she found it difficult to get people to send the children there. She soon realized that they were embarrassed to be in the basement, so it wasn't long before she found a place that would not be demeaning for them, and then they came.

So what are we doing to follow those footsteps today? Obviously, the steady stream of Sisters and Associates to the border along with those who live there that Sisters Janet Gildea, Carol Wirtz, Peggy Deneweth, Andrea Koverman, and others tell us about is the most current reflection of the way she treated the immigrants wherever she met them.

But going back to the beginning, education was of course the original Community ministry, and we all know how the Sisters of Charity have responded to that call for decades, all the way back to Elizabeth Seton. And so were the Sisters in Bedford in education.

So Blandina began as a teacher in Cincinnati, and then sent West, alone, and almost immediately showed her gumption. Wherever Blandina was sent, she responded to whoever needed help regardless of who they were.

No one can forget Blandina getting on the roof of the old Trinidad school to begin to take it apart in order for the people to complete a better, new one. I have to add she also built my school, St. Vincent Academy in Albuquerque, literally helping Navajo Jose Apodaca with one addition. Well, In Guatemala S. Sarah Mulligan is following Blandina's footsteps in helping to build schools too. The government gave funds only for building materials to replace a ramshackle school that should never have even been called a school building, it was in such bad condition. Ask S. Kathy Pinto who couldn't even walk down the aisles, the desks were so close together, and the following year when I was there again, big girls and boys took the younger ones down the hill to relieve

themselves because the wood of the former outhouses had been used for other purposes. With the government funding for the material only, Sarah got funding to pay the workers to build it. And Blandina-like, she checked on them often to be sure they were really working! I saw them get up quickly and get back to work when she appeared!

And for her latest school, after helping the group buy the land, (instead of renting and being displaced twice), she recently finished prodding them to get funding to complete it by hiring a professional fundraiser to help them to reach success. This is the same school where on weekends poor, illiterate adults can work to complete the first grade level all the way to graduate from high school to attend college. One child in the bus with his mother heard her reading a sign, and exclaimed, "Mother, you can read!"

Right here in Cincinnati Blandina must be so happy to see DePaul Cristo Rey, a school for children from lower income families. From what I understood, we Charities thought we were going to combine funding with other Communities, but instead it became Our project, and I think we're proud that it is. And it was our Sisters who found representatives of companies, and people who could help find companies who would hire the students to work one day a week. We Sisters of Charity ourselves have contributed and benefited from their work. In the Archives we've had some wonderful students, those who Veronica along with Joyce has to work to keep busy, and then others that might need a little help. From the beginning Sisters volunteered at Cristo Rey, and Sisters are still volunteering there, Mary Marcel is there this year.

Then there's S. Mary Loyola Mathia involved in building the first Catholic school in Citrus County, Florida. That was after she was supervisor for the West Side of Cleveland with six high schools and 30 grade schools! The next year they give her some help.

As you can see, we are still involved in education. Santa Maria, which Sister Blandina and Justina founded, now has Early Childhood Education and helps families in English

and Spanish. Peggy Rein is volunteering at Holy Family School. Romina Sapinosa with her Master's in International Intercultural Education used the latest technology teaching English for Catholic Charities at the former St. Michael's in Lower Price Hill.

And then Romina Sapinosa was working last summer in New York with refugee children and is continuing this year.

Before we leave the topic of immigrants and refugees, we are blessed to have so many from other countries in our midst. Besides all of us who sometime in our history came from immigrant relatives, think of all those among us: Panama, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and more from Nigeria this afternoon.

At Santa Maria Sister Blandina had cooking classes to help the immigrant women learn more about American cooking, and we have similar photos of S. Ludmilla Hartman at Santa Maria years later with her wonderful groups there in cooking classes. Kay Tardiff and Barbara Huber cooked dinner once a week at the Catholic Workers House, and Barbara Huber, Grace Ann, and I cooked dinner or served at the Drop Inn Center a couple of times with Ruth Bockenstette and my niece, a Mount student, joining us. When the word got out that we had chili with meat, the lines lengthened and lengthened. Now we have S. Annie Klapheke teaching families good nutrition at the Good Samaritan Health Clinic in Price Hill.

Another cooking episode Blandina recounts and so does Paul Horgan in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Lamy of Santa Fe*. Apparently, Archbishop Lamy and Bishop Machbeuf were coming to visit the Jesuits in Old Town, Albuquerque, and there was no cook to prepare dinner for an Archbishop and a Bishop! Blandina told the distraught pastor who came to her to get all the local clergy there to entertain the visitors while the music room of the parish house was being turned into a banquet hall, and the nuns would put together a menu for 6 o'clock. She even gave them topics to talk about! Machbeuf remembered her in Trinidad carrying two hods of plaster for the new schoolhouse she was having built. And the story goes on.

And that brings us to the present with Barbara Bush and her staff with several SCs at W.I.N. building homes for the poor as well as all the other ministries Barb and the others carry out.

Speaking of Mary Marcel leads us into Blandina's work with trafficked women. Blandina always visited those in jail, often bringing food and medicines, in the West and East. (we have several interesting stories about this!) Like Blandina, S. Rose Martin visited and prayed with women in jail for years almost until the day she died. Tricia Cruise had a 12 -story building in San Diego for women coming out of prison or the military, transitioning to temporary housing and then Independent Living. And now she's working with Healthy Moms and Babes, which has a van that travels the Cincinnati streets to help women who don't have access to health care. This van was initiated by 4 communities with our S. Glenda Reimer involved. Furthermore, Tricia's had permission to begin Segale House (named after the sisters), a temporary home for homeless pregnant women, their children, and new babies for 18 months, rent free. I can't forego mentioning Glenda Reimer ferrying sick patients down the river in Southeast Asia with bombs falling on both sides.

In Cincinnati the women in jail asked Blandina why she didn't do something about the root cause of trafficking, the reason so many of them were there as prostitutes. That's all Blandina needed. She found that women in the country were promised good jobs and money for their families if they came to Cincinnati, and then were met at the train and trafficked. Unafraid, she went to the Madam of the brothel and threatened her with the law. Even though the Madam begged her not to ruin her business, Blandina went forward until the woman was brought to court. During that trial she was sent away to another mission so as not to be seen in court during such a trial! This is the short version. The longer version continues in Chapter 12 in *The Santa Maria Institute*, the way she got volunteers to meet the women, have places to stay, and even get the cabmen involved. Recently, S. Mary Marcel had been traveling the streets at night in a van with others to find women who might need help, doing all they could to encourage

them to leave their pimps or at least give them small bags of necessities. Who knows how many were trafficked?

Just as Blandina worked to shelter the homeless in the Wayfarer's House on the Old Town Plaza in Albuquerque, S. Shirley Le Blanc built St. Elizabeth's Shelter in Santa Fe for the homeless, still going strong. My nephew in Santa Fe was surprised his wife had done her Confirmation service project at a place the Sisters had originated.

Associates have taken leading roles, following Elizabeth's and Blandina's footsteps. Deb Rose Milavec, head of Future Church, is a shining example as is Pat Plogman and Christa Bauke, a French speaker, who are working with Sandy Howe and our asylum-seekers, the Congolese family here at the Farmhouse.

In Denver S. Ginny Bohnert works with homeless women and children and those, so vulnerable, who are transgendering into women, at the Gathering Place, a safe daytime shelter that Blandina would be delighted to have had in Albuquerque. at the Wayfarer's House. It provides laundry, showers, daycare, and more. Ginny helps the women who make greeting cards, and she also helps sell them for the artists who get a percentage, a little spending money.

S. Nancy Crafton is being awarded for the wonderful work she does for immigrants and the poor in Pueblo as does S. Juana Mendez who has been working for years in Kentucky, even traveling to the border whenever she can assist someone with their needed documents. I've heard her help out at at a crowded Spanish Mass by giving the homily in Spanish for an English-speaking priest.

Just as Blandina went out to the miners in the West, so did S. Ruth Ann Rody, S. Imelda Sekerak, and later S. Mary Barbara Philippart in Pineville, Kentucky, home to struggling miners. S. Imelda, by the way, got her driver's license when she was in her 50s just before she went there so as to be more available. One Blandina story is of her helping a miner in the hospital who had been a thorn in her side and had been really

mean to her out on one begging trip. Not to embarrass him, she never mentioned their former acquaintance though both knew it quite well!

Speaking of the Rodys, along with so many other missionaries, Chris Rody worked in El Salvador as did Irene Mraz who was there for five years. It makes us think of Blandina and our Sisters going West to the Territories, a foreign place, not yet part of the United States.

Blandina was sent as a music teacher to Trinidad and elsewhere, and once I went through her book to find every reference to music. Many! To me one of the most surprising events was her managing for Christmas 1873, in Trinidad, to put on Mozart's 12th Mass with organ, harp, and violin with choir accompaniment! So besides all the wonderful music teachers and composers in our Community, we have Terry Thorman who not only directs beautiful music, often with a choir at the Motherhouse, but also teaches downtown at Peaslee Center. She's brought children and proud adults to the Motherhouse for recitals. And S. Alice Ann O'Neill and her amazing recitals with students from 2 to 50 has made our chapel resound with beautiful music. Blandina must be smiling.

To a practical vein, and Blandina surely was practical, she was never shy about asking for funding, writing once in Italian and receiving a response in Italian from the Royal Italian Embassy! And we can all name others in our time, not shy, who request and receive funding, not only from our generous S.C. Ministry Foundation, but from our Social Justice Fund, and the Seton Enablement Fund.

About asking, Blandina is famous for her request to Thomas Edison when she was exploring education for the deaf. She thought since he could convey sound through wires, why couldn't he do something like that for the deaf. We have the precious pencil sketch of his response, a prototype of a hearing aid. Besides remembering all the Sisters who worked and still volunteer at St. Rita's School for the Deaf, you can't be around the Motherhouse long before you find S. Mary Dugan helping those with hearing

problems get better hearing. Of course her own textbooks illustrated by S. Anna Marie Ahl, preceded her here. They are now being translated into Spanish by S. Mary Frances Boyle,

Blandina wasn't a nurse, but she was the one the Sisters of Loretto called for to make Archbishop Lamy take his medicine. And think of all the nurses and hospital administrators who have made our Community proud for decades in our hospitals and as Public Health Nurses like S. Joanna Mary Hendrich in inner city schools.

About 1994 I interviewed people at San Antonio Church, the one Blandina and Justina and Euphrasia Hartman started in a storefront for the people who couldn't get downtown to the Italian Mass. One of the men told me when Blandina told a person to jump, you asked, "How high?" That must have been the one Archbishop Lamy said yes to. We have more quotes and a video of those who knew Blandina, and no one can say enough about how good she was. One kept saying, "She was a saint."

And what about so many Sisters in Mother Margaret? How can Blandina be emulated there? In many ways. One after another who knew Blandina in the Infirmary spoke of her kindness. Apparently, she always said thank you for the least little thing done for her. They usually saw her with her rosary, and we know she asked S Loretto Burke, a postulant, to pray with her often. Loretto said as long as she was able, Blandina visited the ones around her on her floor in the old St. Mary's Infirmary, especially considerate of the sickest ones. We know how quickly S. Roz Hafertepe and others respond on email to anyone who needs prayers. Blandina always welcomed visitors. Buddy la Rosa, a foundational member of San Antonio still, remembers as a very young child coming with his grandmother when she visited Blandina in the Infirmary, His single mother left him with his grandmother while she worked. And Blandina's family, very close to her, had visited her just before she died.

Before I conclude, I have to admit I couldn't find a person who copied Blandina in two ways:

First: Mrs. Glockner in Colorado Springs wanted Blandina in Pueblo involved in her wish to have the Sisters of Charity take over Glockner Sanatorium, now morphed into Penrose Hospital.

When Blandina was told that lay trustees formed the board, she told her that the Sisters would not accept it under that condition. Informed, Mother Blanche told Blandina to go to the Springs anyway and take an inventory. In the meantime Mrs. Glockner wrote to her lawyer in New York, and Blandina was in on the final solution: Have the Trustees resign one by one and one of the Sisters take his place until the governing power is fully in the hands of the Sisters. And so it was done.

The second one I couldn't find a modern example for was this: A priest in Cincinnati hand wrote her a page-long letter, ending with his scathing remark that there were many priests in Cincinnati who did not enjoy working with her. Personally, I would have been devastated, but not Blandina. She wrote right back that there were many priests in Cincinnati that she didn't enjoy working with either!

I've tried to highlight only a few examples of the ways we're still following in Blandina's footsteps. There are so many more! Writers, for example. Lecturers; Blandina gave lectures on various topics all over the country. So after a 1-minute stretch, please gather in groups of 3 or so, and to share some more examples, and then we can share those with the larger group. Thank you.

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Thank you for all your sharing, and I believe we can all agree with my sister who said she thinks Blandina should wear not a black cape but a red one, She surely is a Superwoman! And a Saint!

And since this is Reflection Sunday, I'd like to close with my favorite Blandina prayers. I'm not sure if she composed it herself, but she did write it to a friend:

We are born to die.

Death begins with our birth.

Paradoxically, we are born never to die.

Both acts, Life and Death, come from incomprehensible love as enduring as Eternity.

Thank you.

S. Victoria Marie Forde, S.C.