

**Bl. Maria Luisa Merkert
(Silesia / Poland) 1817-1872**

*Dedicated herself to assisting the sick and poor and
collected alms for their needs.*

*Co-Foundress and first Superior General of
the Congregation of the Gray Sisters of St Elizabeth.*



Maria Luisa Merkert, religious sister of St. Elizabeth, "was born on 21 September 1817, at Nysa in Silesia, Poland, then part of the Breslau Diocese and in German territory. Maria was the second daughter born to Karol Antoni Merkert and Maria Barbara Pfitzner, from a strongly Catholic and German middle-class family. She was baptized the next day in the church of St. James and St. Agnieszka (Agnes).

Maria's father died when she was just nine months old which resulted in the family being impoverished. Maria and her older sister Matilde graduated from the Catholic school for girls in Nysa. Their mother educated both girls in a spirit of faith and love and in the practice of authentic Christian values. The religious atmosphere at home influenced the girls' formation and sowed the desire to serve

the Lord in religious life and their neighbor through charitable works.

Maria assisted her mother during the illness prior to her death on 11 July 1842. After their mother's death, they both sold their modest fortune and, together with Franciska Werner and Klara Wolff (a Third Order Franciscan), devoted themselves to helping the abandoned sick and homeless in Nysa.

After the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on September 27, 1842, (this day was a memorial of Saints Cosmas and Damian, doctors-martyrs from the 3rd century), they laid down in front of the painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the church of St. James and St. Agnieszka, making an act of devotion to help those in need, regardless of religion, nationality and gender. Thus began the "Association of Sisters for the Assistance of Abandoned Sick, under the Protection of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus." The parish priest, Father Francis Xavier Fischer, gave them his blessing.

Maria dedicated herself to assisting the sick and poor and collected alms for their needs. On 31 July 1844 the first five Sisters signed the Statutes of the young Association. By 8 May 1846 their number dropped to four with the death of Matilde Merkert, who had contracted typhus while caring for the sick.

Discerning the young Sisters' need for religious formation, Father Fischer encouraged them to enter the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Charles Borromeo in Prague, and on Christmas Day 1846 they began this period of religious formation.

On 30 June 1850, grateful for the formation they had received, Maria and Frances left the Sisters of Mercy to dedicate themselves to their original project of serving the homebound sick and needy. On 19 November 1850, Feast of St Elizabeth of Hungary, with full trust in God, the Sisters again took up their works of mercy at Nysa. They were known as the Grey Sisters of St Elizabeth. They focused their concern on people who had no one to care for them with a desire to keep them in their own environment. It was typical of the first Elizabethan women to keep people in their homes.

In December 1850, Maria submitted the names of her companions, as well as the Association's Statutes, to the local magistrate. On an ecclesiastic level, the Institute was approved by Bishop Henry Förster of Breslau on 4 September 1859. The first General Chapter was held on 15 December 1859 and Maria Merkert was elected Superior General, a position she held for 13 years until her death.

On 5 May 1860 Mother Maria and 25 Sisters professed the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, along with a fourth vow to assist the sick and most needy. The Motherhouse was built in Nysa during the years 1863 to 1865. Under her leadership, 90 religious houses, 12 hospitals, and many nursing homes were established in 9 dioceses (Chelmno, Gniezno-Poznan, Warmia, Wroclaw, Fulda, Olomouc, Osnabruck, Prague, Paderborn) and 2 apostolic vicariates (Saxony and Sweden). On June 7, 1871, Pope Pius IX approved the congregation she founded. In 1887, the definitive approval as a Congregation of Pontifical Right was granted by Pope Leo XIII.

The life and work of Mother Maria Merkert was animated by a spirit of ardent charity for the suffering members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Her sequella Christi was marked by a radical and creative dedication to the sick and the most needy by putting into practice Jesus' words, "As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 40).

Mother Maria's maternal solicitude was also directed toward her Sisters, to whom she gave a lofty spiritual and moral formation characterized by a profound spirit of humility.

Mother Maria died in the odor of sanctity on 14 November 1872 in Nysa at the age of 55. At the time of her death, the congregation had 465 sisters in 87 houses. She was buried at the local Jerusalem Cemetery.

On 16 July 1964 her mortal remains were placed in the crypt in the Church of St. James and St. Agnieszka in Nysa, and on 19 September 1998 they were translated to a marble sarcophagus in a side chapel of the same Church.

Mother Maria Merkert was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of heroic virtue on 20 December 2004 by Pope St. John Paul II.¹ Pope Benedict XVI in June 2007 approved the decree on the miracle through the intercession of Maria Merkert which was the healing of tuberculosis of one of the Elizabethan women, Mira's sister.² She was beatified on 30 September 2007 in the Cathedral of Saints James the Apostle and Agnes, Nysa (Poland), presided by Cardinal José Saraiva Martins,³ prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. (Memorial November 14).

*As you did it to one of the least of My brethren,
you did it to Me.*

References:

- 1) Vatican News Service. Blessed Maria Luisa Merkert (1817-1872). https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20070930_merkert_en.html. Accessed 6 April 2022.
- 2) Parafia Rzymskokatolicka pw. Zwiastowania Panskiego. Parish Announcement - Memorial of Bl. Maria Luisa Merkert. <https://www.zwiastowanepanskie.com.pl/2017/11/12/14-listopada-wspomnienie-bl-marii-luizy-merkert/>. Accessed 6 April 2022.

