Poverty, Child Abandonment, Partitioning Provide Milieu for Sophia’s Formation

By +Sister Ellen Marie Kuznicki, CSSF

Environmental conditions surrounding the early life of Mother Mary Angela Truszkowska accounted significantly for the formation of her personality and the spirit she instilled into the Congregation she founded. Poland, the land of her birth, ceased to exist in 1795. Warsaw, where in 1855, the Felician Congregation sprang into being, remained the first twelve years under the Prussian yoke until Napoleon’s defeat of Prussia freed the city. In 1814, the Congress of Vienna allowed Russia the “Kingdom of Poland.” However, during this period, little was changed in the culture of the people. Administration, courts and education retained a strictly Polish character until the Insurrection of 1830.

Also, following the Napoleonic wars, Europe faced the challenge of an industrial revolution. Its early effects of poverty and child abandonment led, in 1855, to the founding of the Felician Congregation in Warsaw. At the same time, the Church showed unmistakable signs of vitality, lacking in the previous century. In Poland this first became evident in the universities which were centers of renewed faith in life fostered by youth groups. Courses in philosophy led students to believe that feelings and faith determined one’s lifestyle. Among those completing law studies in 1822, at the University of Warsaw, was Joseph Truszkowski, who eventually impressed upon his first-born child, Sophia, his philosophical ideology.

Born in Kruszyn in the Bialystok Province of northeastern Poland, Joseph exhibited a love for knowledge. The family manorial residence housed a library stocked with valuable books which attracted his scholarly interests. As the only son of a wealthy landowner, Joseph

(continued on page 2)
Poverty, Child Abandonment. . . (continued)

might have had a relatively comfortable life as an estate administrator. Instead, he renounced his inheritance, in favor of his sisters, except for the library, to pursue law studies. As a jurist, he chose to serve those in need. He established his own household with the library he inherited from his family. Joseph often found his daughter Sophia lost in reading the serious literary works located there.

After completing his studies in 1822, Joseph Truszkowski married the sixteen-year-old Josephine Rudzinska, a half-sister of Martin Ciechanowski, father of Clothilde, who with Sophia laid foundations for the Felician Congregation. A daughter of a country squire, Josephine enjoyed the privilege of being educated at the Visitandines Convent School in Warsaw. The wedding took place shortly after she completed her studies. The newlyweds moved to Kalisz, a city in the Poznan Province, where Joseph accepted a position as a magistrate of the juvenile court.

The young couple expected their first child in July 1825, but to the dismay of the parents, Sophia was born two months prematurely on May 16. The parents had Sophia baptized at once because there seemed to be little hope for the survival of the child. Both the physician and the parents harbored doubts as to the child’s normal development. The young mother spared no efforts in tending to the needs of her life-threatened firstborn. Clothed in cotton for warmth and tended by a wet nurse for nourishment, the child, despite all forebodings, developed normally.

Sophia’s parents, fearing to impair the child’s frail health, restrained from any disagreement, grief or word that might cause the child to cry. Showering the child with love and affection, the parents were permissive, allowing Sophia to get her way without restraint. In fact, the child quickly became a tiny family tyrant. By nature capricious and stubborn but very affectionate, Sophia nevertheless learned a love for prayer from her deeply religious mother. In addition, Josephine served as a model of self-control, mortification and integrity for her daughter, implanting in Sophia’s soul a longing for religious life.

From early childhood, Sophia exhibited an unusual sensitivity to human misery. Whatever funds she acquired, she gave away to the poor. That generous spirit surfaced especially in the 1850s when she gathered the abandoned children in Warsaw, giving them shelter, food, clothing and even a basic education. Sophia also displayed an unusual eagerness for learning which her parents attempted to satisfy by employing a tutor for their daughter, Anastasia Kotowicz, under whose direction the child developed intellectually and
socially. In 1837, when the family moved to Warsaw, Sophia’s father enrolled her at Madame Lehmann’s Academy, a private boarding school, where she pursued studies for four years. Once Sophia attained her goal, she tutored her younger brothers and sisters.

Being a woman born to a family of wealth and prestige, and endowed with intelligence and sensitivity to those in need, Sophia utilized her God-given traits to achieve, by her own efforts, a status of leadership in the Church as a Foundress of a Congregation for women whose educational and social activities are inestimable.

A Pause for Reflection

By Sister Marie Alexander Siegel, CSSF

Sensitive to human misery, Sophia responded to the needs of the time in which she lived. Likewise, her daughters have followed in her generous spirit throughout the years. I reflected on my own experience when I ministered at Our Lady of Grace Home for Children in Newark, Delaware. It was founded as an orphanage and also served as a summer home for other orphans from New Jersey. The children were afforded an opportunity to experience country living on a real active farm.

The Felician Sisters had orphanages (homes) in several of the former provinces. On my recent visit to Holly, Michigan, I recalled how the orphans from Detroit would come to the country during the summer and enjoy the wonderings of the many acres, the woods, the lake and swimming and then retire to the bunk beds in the cabins.

While it may have seemed so exciting for the time, and dreams of fancy for what life could be, the reality would not change for them. They were orphans and no different from the orphans that (Sophia) Mary Angela and Clothilde had in their care. Mary Angela’s daughters followed her example and created loving, nurturing, warm and faith-filled homes for children. Many homes for children no longer exist around Our Lady of Hope Province but their memory lives on.

Further reflection brings me to a different aspect of Sophia (Mary Angela), formation in the milieu in which she lived. The exceptional fine education that she received afforded her the opportunity to tutor her younger siblings as well as provide a basic education to the children and women she sheltered. In the preceding article, Sister Ellen Marie Kuznicki wrote: “Being a woman born to a
family of wealth and prestige, and endowed with intelligence and sensitivity to those in need, Sophia utilized her God-given traits to achieve, by her own efforts, a status of leadership in the Church…”

Sophia was a born leader and she strived to provide her sisters with the opportunity to develop leadership qualities in order to better serve in their various ministries. The Felician Sisters of today, seeing the need for young women to have good leadership skills, have developed a week long program entitled “Seeds of Hope.” It was offered for the first time in 2014. In June 2019, the program was held at Maryville Retreat Center in Holly, Michigan. This Felician youth leadership experience provides the catalyst for young women to explore the Felician Franciscan core values of respect for human dignity, compassion, transformation, solidarity with the poor, and justice and peace into patterns of life values and leadership skills. Presentations were given by Felician sisters, lay women who partner with the sisters in various ministries, and other women guest speakers.

At the conclusion of the program, the participants were called to go forth and be servant leaders to others and the Church. The Felician Sisters were an engaging presence among the young women as they formed a community that was learning, working and inspiring one another. It was a gift for me as a Felician Sister to be present and witness the next generation of servant leaders in our Church and world. One does not know where these “seeds” are going – but there is HOPE!

• How do I respond to the needs in my milieu – family, neighborhood, work place and city?

• Am I willing to share my gifts, time and resources, both material and financial, to help others?

• Have I participated in programs or short-term activities that benefited the poor?
Angela, you were moved by the plight of neglected children, women, the sick, the homeless, the aged, the illiterate, immigrants, victims of war and all who did not know the love and mercy of God,

Pray for these people in our world today.

(Invocation from Litany of Blessed Mary Angela)

Reflection on the Litany Invocation

The heartbeat of Sophia Truszkowska from early on was to live out passionately her love for God, the Church and the whole world. She wanted to live wholly for God, yet she wanted to champion His cause among all peoples. Simply separating herself from the world would not automatically lead her to God. Fulfillment for her meant serving God by doing good to everyone.

The Vincentian spirit, so prevalent in the history of the Church in the 17th century, also had a profound influence on Sophia Truszkowska. In 1854, she enrolled in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul operating out of Holy Cross Church in Warsaw. As a member of the society, she joined other women in providing the destitute with material and spiritual aid.

Sophia was not a novice at this sort of thing. For years she had been engaged in works of mercy, first using her own small allowance and later seeking substantial support from her family. Now it became the major orientation of her life. She came to know the full scope of human degradation. The fate of neglected children horrified her most of all. She discovered the underworld and the curse of organized crime. She came to understand the full meaning of the stories her father told her about his years as a judge in the juvenile court in Kalisz. Her compassion for these youngsters knew no bounds. Soon she organized the Institute of Miss Truszkowska.

With the beginnings of the Congregation in 1855, Mother Mary Angela was already extending the apostolic activities to nursing the sick and comforting the aged.

Mother Mary Angela’s vision for apostolic activity for her young community embraced the needs of all people, especially the poor and needy, regardless of nationality or race. In response to Sister Hedwig’s concern that the sisters had been providing care to both the insurgents and Russians during the January Uprising in 1863, she responded, “Do not discriminate among the sick…give aid to all without exception….your vocation obliges you not to exclude anybody, for everyone is our neighbor.”

Never one to limit the activities of her sisters, Mother Angela was willing to have them move into many and varied apostolates in the spirit of selfless giving.

(“A Novena of Reflections for the Centenary of Blessed Mary Angela’s Death,” pp. 6-7.)
Blessed Angela devotional materials are available as follows:

- Holy card with a prayer to Blessed Mary Angela
- Litany of Blessed Mary Angela
- Blessed Mary Angela medal
- Blessed Mary Angela rosary - wooden beads
- Blessed Mary Angela brochure

There is no fee attached to these items.

New items are as follows:

**Blessed Mary Angela rosary or chaplet bracelet** – these are created by the young women of the Felician Sisters Mission in Jacmel, Haiti. A donation for these items will provide funding for the education of these women in the Haiti mission.

**Blessed Mary Angela Rosary** – made in Italy. A donation for this item will support the Felician Sisters Mission in Haiti.

Contact the regional coordinator nearest you to obtain any of the above listed items.

Pray to Blessed Mary Angela for your needs and those of others. You are invited to send in your prayer requests and the sisters throughout North America will join you in prayer. Please notify us when your prayers have been answered.