



## *In Loving Memory*

### Sister Melvina Pausina

**A**t 106 years of age, Sister Melvina was the oldest of the several thousand member international congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Her earliest years are stranger than fiction. She loved to retell the events. Her mother, Anna Stipelcovich, who tended sheep in Croatia, fell in love with Gaspard Pausina. Gaspard went to America first and Anna followed. Then they married. Gaspard found work and a home in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Like many other Yugoslavian fishermen, he found the area similar to their Adriatic Sea home. When Anna came, she and Gaspard married in Buras, Louisiana. The Pausinas established their home on Olga, an island in the Mississippi River.

Four boys were born to the Pausinas in the early years of their marriage. Then finally a girl, Anna, was born. The sixth child, also a girl, was named Zorka. It was Zorka who was to become Sister Melvina.

Sister Melvina related the following, “When they took the child across the river by boat to be baptized, the priest did not understand the broken English of my parents or God-parents. He named me ‘Anthony’ for my God-father, thinking I was a boy.” One can clearly read the Certificate of Baptism: This is to certify that Anthony, child of Gaspard Pausina and Anna Stipelcovich, born on January 12, 1911 was baptized according to the Rite of the Roman Catholic Church.

Back on Olga, Zorka thrived in this caring family. The family grew again when their third little girl, Amelia, was born. When Zorka was just two and a half years old, Gaspard died. Mrs. Pausina must now support her seven children. She found work in housekeeping for several wealthy Croatian families in New Orleans. She could only keep the nine-month-old Amelia with her. The six other children she placed in the care of the School Sisters of Notre Dame at St. Joseph Orphanage in New Orleans. Neither Mother nor children could speak a word of English. The Sisters helped the mother by taking Zorka with the others. Though puzzled by her baptismal certificate, the Sisters called her Antoinette.

It seems that several steps of miscommunication caused the next baffling turn-of-events. Antoinette was younger than the children usually accepted at the orphanage, so the Sisters found place for her at the nearby Daughters of Charity’s St. Vincent Home. Since babies at St. Vincent were customarily put up for adoption, within a short time Antoinette was adopted.

Let Zorka-Antoinette tell the story. “The adopting couple seemed like parents to Antoinette. She had been with them for a month when Mrs. Pausina went looking for her. She had a hard time for Antoinette did not want to go with her Mother. Mrs. Pausina took her. When Antoinette was about four years old she was sent back to St. Joseph Orphanage.”

The older brothers, one-by-one, ran away from the orphanage and found their way back to Olga. The fishermen there took care of them.

Antoinette lived and started school at the orphanage. When she was about nine years old, a doctor was called to diagnose her weak condition. He advised that Antoinette would die unless she had a less rigid lifestyle than that of the orphanage. Mrs. Pausina brought Amelia, who was now seven years old, to the orphanage and took Antoinette/Zorka to live with her. Antoinette continued elementary school at St. Louis Cathedral School taught by the Teresian Sisters.

Seven years after Gaspard Pausina’s death, another Croatian immigrant, John Rudez, married Anna Pausina. Shortly after they were married, John told ‘Mama Anna’, “Come to Olga and bring the children.” Melvina related, “On Olga we were all happy and free. The whole family was now together and lived on Olga for the next three years. John then sold the store he owned, and the family moved to New Orleans. Soon after this Olga was destroyed by one of Louisiana’s hurricanes.”

*continued*

**Birth**  
January 12, 1911

**Baptism**  
December 2, 1911

**Profession**  
July 22, 1932

**Death**  
February 25, 2017

**Burial**  
Chatawa Cemetery  
Chatawa, Mississippi

*Precious and blessed is  
the death of the faithful  
before God... for  
they die in union with  
their dear Jesus, in the  
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger  
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

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*Sister Melvina Pausina*



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Now Antoinette had another birth-information problem---her birthplace no longer existed. She had to substitute Buras when asked for her place-of-birth. She still had to give a repeated explanation for the mismatch of her names. In New Orleans, Antoinette and her older sister, Anna, found good jobs in the French Market Bakery. Antoinette worked there for three years.

In 1928, five girls of St. Joseph Orphanage were to become candidates of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Since those to be received were their old classmates, the three Pausina girls attended the ceremony. Antoinette wanted to enter too. Only her persistent prayer to the Blessed Mother helped her overcome the family's objections. The following year Antoinette too became a candidate. After a year of service at the orphanage, Antoinette joined the candidates at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis.

The family, though frequently separated by circumstances, were very devoted to one another. When it was time to receive a new name along with the habit of the congregation, Antoinette implored her superiors to be named Melvina. This saint's name was the closest she could find to that of her brother's Croation name 'Miljenko.' Following the year in the novitiate, Sister Melvina took her vows in 1932.

Sister Melvina was missioned to assist in the candidature at Ripa. She shed copious tears of disappointment at not going out as the other newly professed did. She must have been well placed in the assignment for after six years as 'house-mother' and assistant with a firm, but empathetic approach in the candidature she skillfully undertook similar assignments for many of her years of active ministry. She is probably most fondly remembered for her 13 years of caring for the boarders at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa.

Somewhat similar care of boarders was her responsibility at Madonna Manor home for children and at the Institute for the deaf. She also assisted in the classroom at these two Marrero, Louisiana facilities, Sister Melvina taught primary children for more than 20 years in Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Missouri, and Texas.

Invitation to Rome's Generalate Jubilee Program in 1978 gave impetus to Sister Melvina's long held desire to visit her family origins in Croatia. With her own sister, Anna, and her cousin, Marie, she left New Orleans in late May 1978. After the spiritual program in Rome and the heritage trip to congregational sites in Germany, the three cousins met and set out for Yugoslavia to gather life-long memories of finding roots and enjoying feasts and fun among the Pausinas and Stipelkovichs. One would enjoy reading her lengthy journal.

Fifty years after her profession, Sister Melvina returned in 1982 to assist the staff at St. Mary of the Pines. Her dailiness always included the Sacraments, multiple rosaries, and reading of both spiritual and current affairs. The sisters who lived with her can share fascinating stories of Melvina's prayerfulness, her self-scheduling, her exactness in performing duties, her crocheting, and her prolific correspondence. None of the tales are more absorbing than are the accounts Melvina related herself. Some lost history of Chatawa can be retrieved in the vignettes Sister Melvina recorded. On a lighter side, Sister Melvina so enjoyed some treats in life--- her bingo games with multiple cards, fried chicken and chocolate. Sister Melvina was as remarkable in her aging as she was in the rest of her life. She was mentally agile through her last days. And for a person whose heart was weak at nine years of age, she maintained physical agility too---well into her 90s.

Melvina loved celebrations. Being the center of a great one in 2011 thrilled her. For her hundredth birthday, The Governor of Mississippi honored her with a State Commendation. The local press celebrated her on the occasion, the community relished her enjoyment of their party for her. Pausina and Stipelkovich cousins were here too.

Sister Melvina's physical decline was rather rapid after the celebration. During the last two years she was mostly bedridden; She could still communicate during the last days. Sister Melvina died very peacefully at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Miss. on February 25, 2017. May she rest in peace.