

## Breaking New Ground in the Interests of the Faith

The subject of this article, **Sister M. Celestine Delehanty** and her impact on the growth of the art of Catechetics in the western United States, needs a short preamble. She was born Elizabeth Delehanty November 20, 1876 in Rio Vista, California and entered the Sisters of the Holy Family almost 27 years later on August 13, 1903. At her entrance Elizabeth was already a highly accomplished and certified public school teacher. Her interest, from the beginning of her Holy Family career, was in an informed, intelligent and educated presentation of the truths of the faith to public school children and families but, above all, the in-depth preparation of the teachers of religion for their task. The saint whose name she bore, Peter Celestine, (did she choose it herself, we don't know) had a somewhat brief, but startling public history. His unshakable decision to follow his own conscience, despite universal opposition, left a deep impression on succeeding centuries.



### **Pope Peter Celestine V**



Peter Celestine V was a disaster as a Pope, but a successful saint, one we celebrate on May 19th. He had lived as a hermit for most of his life and, at the age of eighty-four, wrote a letter to the College of Cardinals who, after two years, had still not chosen a pontiff to succeed the one who had died. He told them, in effect, to hurry it up because God most certainly was not pleased with the delay. They responded by electing the gentle, humble and uncomplicated man himself. Peter wept at the news, accepted, called himself Celestine V and occupied the office for five months. He was taken advantage of by everyone looking for power and position. He evidently could not deny any request and made a muddle of the entire business. Having tried to do the job and recognizing his inadequacies he did what any reasonable person would do under the circumstances -- he resigned. That set off a furor of debate and argument. Could a Pope resign? Since they accepted the theory that the Pope had no superior in the Church, the theologians were in a

quandary over the legality of resignation. The elderly man had no doubts at all and escaped from Rome. Eventually, his successor found and imprisoned him, ostensibly to keep him from being taken advantage of by the Church's enemies. The ancient hermit died, as he had lived most of his life, cheerfully and faithfully in a cell. The strength of his convictions, his love for and loyalty to the Church's best interests, and his stunning resignation of office, despite rampant opposition, are the human highlights of his holiness.

### ***Systematic lessons in Religion, Scripture and Catechetics***

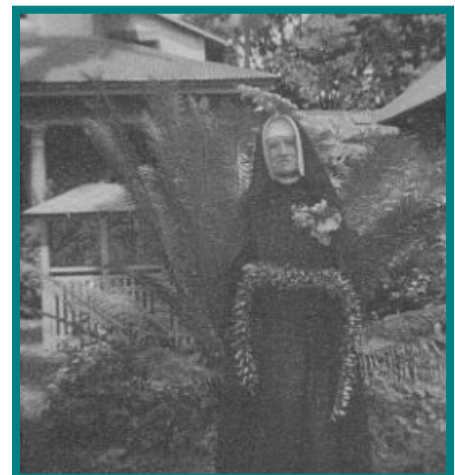
Loving the Church with the same sort of integrity, and desiring that instruction in the faith be the best she could provide, Sister Celestine began, from her first years in the Community, to work out systematic lessons in Religion, Scripture and Catechetics for herself, and then for the novices and young professed sisters in Holy Family. She organized teacher training classes for the lay people who assisted in catechetical sessions with children and families. Catechesis, growth in faith through instruction, liturgy, witness and experience, became the inspiration for all of Sister Celestine's labors and it is probable that she was attracted to Holy Family because that was one of the major works of the Community.

### ***Graded Catechisms for children***

Sister, with her awareness of the needs of children, prepared a series of graded Catechisms for children, based on the Baltimore Catechism, the text used throughout the United States at that time. She prepared teachers' materials to go with the texts building the lessons around the progression of the Liturgical Year. The manual included a month by month introduction of the feasts and seasons; the doctrinal content of lessons taught in that time period; Scripture stories associated with the lessons; suggestions for visual aides, prayers, and liturgical actions connected with the lesson; further reading for the Teacher from the Scriptures, theology and handbooks; supplementary materials for both catechist and child. Hymns and spiritual songs were suggested for teaching. Teacher manuals are common in Catechetics today. During the years of Sister Celestine's ministry that was not the case.

### ***New Convents Established***

In 1940, Sister Celestine was elected to the office of Superior General by her community and retained that position until 1952. During her administration the Community went from its status as a diocesan community to that of a



Pontifical Institute and 10 new convents were established, including one in Texas and two in the territory of Hawaii. She sponsored the establishment of Holy Family College a training center affiliated with the Catholic University at Washington D.C., for the furthering of the educational abilities of the sisters.

### ***Expansion of Catechesis***

Her catechisms, as well as a Bible History text she prepared for the use of post-Confirmation aged students, were used throughout California, Nevada, in Texas and on the Island of Hawaii. After her completion of office in 1952, Sister Celestine revised the entire series. The Sisters of the Holy Family had been engaged in the religious education of public school children and their families since 1872. These texts of Sister Celestine advanced the quality of Catechetics for the public school child throughout the western United States.

This effect was furthered during summer schools in far-flung, tiny communities throughout the areas where the sisters traveled in summertime (beginning in 1929) even before the advent of Sister Celestine's catechisms. The Sisters went to establish 4-6 week summer sessions to prepare children and adults for receiving the sacraments, to enjoy craft projects, to go on outings and to enjoy things Catholics did not have available during the year. Under Sister Celestine's leadership the summer schools expanded into California's gold country, Nevada's far-flung hamlets and even around the Island of Molokai.

### ***Guilds Established***

In later years, Sister's tireless energy prompted her to establish the Holy Family Guild, a lay organization of men and women attached to the areas in which the sisters lived and worked, with the purpose of furthering and often assisting in the work of these home missionaries.

While her saintly patron, Peter Celestine, did not do well in administration, Sister Celestine did very well. But she, like her saint before her, was urged to activity because of love for the Church, hope for the advancement of the Reign of God, the strength of conviction, prayer and cheerfulness.

On February 8, 1961 this amazingly productive and gentle spirited lady went home to God. Like Celestine V, she was a humble, loyal, unassuming champion of what was life-giving and supportive of faith and reality in the Church.