

ANNA DENGEL (1892-1980)

Anna Dengel was born in the Austrian town of Steeg in the state of Tyrol on March 16, 1892. Following the premature death of her mother (which occurred when Anna was only nine years old), she and her brothers were raised by her father who, after having remarried, had four other children. Anna was deeply affected by the loss of her mother and this event influenced her work and, above all, the commitment she put into the care of women and mothers. Hers was a wealthy family, and her father devoted himself to raising his children.

After completing her studies in Hall and Innsbruck, at the age of seventeen, Anna started working as a German teacher in Lyon. At that time, she learned of a school that trained women as nurses. Working there was Dr. Agnes McLaren, one of the very first women physician of the era. Dr. McLaren's main goal was to provide medical care for women in India, especially Muslim women, who could not be treated by male physicians because of Islamic laws. At age 72, when she received the blessing of Pope Pius X, Dr. McLaren departed for India where and in 1910, she founded St. Catherine's Hospital for women and children.

Initially she tried to persuade religious orders to provide medical assistance in India and other the mission territories, but her attempt failed because of a twelfth-century ecclesiastical decree that forbade nuns from studying and practicing medicine. Dr. McLaren then began looking for young European and American women who wanted to become nurses or doctors and were willing to move to India to carry out this mission. The then twenty-year-old Anna Dengel became aware of this urgent need and immediately

considered this to be exactly what she was waiting for. She wrote as much in a letter saying, “This is the answer to my greatest dream and heartfelt desire: to be a missionary with a specific goal, to carry out such an urgent task that only a woman can achieve. This is my dream from childhood.”

The correspondence between Anna and Dr. McLaren immediately proved to be complicated, since the doctor did not speak German and Dengel did not know English. The doctor encouraged the young Tyrolean to study medicine in Cork, Ireland, because it was necessary to obtain an English qualification to work in India, which was still an English colony. Unfortunately, the two women never met because Dr. McLaren died in 1913.

Anna completed her studies in Cork in 1919. In December of that year she arrived in Rawalpindi (present-day Pakistan) and began working in St. Catherine’s Hospital. Her routine, which absorbed all of her energy, included work at the hospital, language study, visits to homes, and the concerns of everyday life. At least 150 patients each day went to the hospital for assistance and treatment. After about three years, Anna was assailed by an inner restlessness. A priest understood that Anna had received a religious calling and advised her to become part of a missionary order. But she found herself facing the same problem that had plagued Dr. McLaren: if she took religious vows, she would have to give up her career as a doctor.

In 1924, Anna entrusted the management of the clinic to an Indian doctor and returned to Innsbruck for a retreat. There she developed the desire to establish a religious order of doctors, an idea supported by the priest who led the retreat. She then went to the United States for six months in search of funds and women who shared her interest in the project. Soon a doctor and two nurses joined her. So on September 30, 1925, the Medical Mission Sisters were born in Washington, D.C. Since the nuns were still forbidden to practice medicine, the community was founded as a pious society without vows.

Anna Dengel worked many years to bring about a change in canon law and remove the prohibition against religious sisters practicing medicine.

In 1936, Pope Pius XI revoked the ban with the decree *Constans ac Sedula*, and in 1941 the community of the Medical Mission Sisters finally became a religious congregation with vows. Then in 1959, they received the decree of the Holy See which made it a Religious Institute of Pontifical Right.

The Institute, which began with four sisters now counts over 500 members working in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Many of the hospitals first established by the sisters are now being administered by the local population, which is what the founding sisters would have wanted. Today, the sisters no longer focus their attention solely on strictly medical or surgical services, but on promoting the overall integral well-being of people in need and their salvation in Christ.

Dr. Anna Dengel's most famous student was undoubtedly Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who received medical training with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna, India. The two women did not meet in person until near the end of Anna's life and although they had not always followed the same line of thought, they both shared a profound commitment and love for charity towards the poorest of the poor. Both founded religious congregations, and their zeal was able to forever change the Church and the world.

In 1973, Dr. Anna Dengel passed on the direction of the Medical Mission Sisters to the next generation with these words: "The future belongs to you. Take care to understand the difficulties of your time just as I understood the difficulties of mine." In the spring of 1976, she had a stroke that left her partially paralyzed. She was still at the hospital in Rome when Mother Teresa came to visit her. Dr. Dengel recognized her old acquaintance and asked her to hold her hands, as is customary in India, as a symbol of heredity and spiritual blessing. She died in Rome on April 17, 1980, and was buried at Campo Santo Teutonico.