

MONASTERY OF OUR LADY OF GRACE, NORTH GUILFORD, CONN.

[The following article was written for *Dominicana* by one of the members of the North Guilford community who was present during the fire of December 23.]



THE ORIGINAL MONASTERY of Our Lady of Grace in North Guilford was totally destroyed by fire on the evening of December 23rd. Compline had been sung as usual, and the cloistered nuns had saluted the Queen of Heaven with the *Salve Regina* procession. Almost everyone was on the way to bed, when the cry of "FIRE" was heard by those at adoration and the few nuns who had not yet gone upstairs. Immediate attempts were made to smother the blaze and to use extinguishers, but a short circuit in a wall plug had ignited the inside of the wall and the flames spread with unbelievable rapidity. By the time Reverend Mother Prioress could come from the infirmary (about three minutes), the smoke had filled the chapel and approach to the fire itself was impossible. She started to make the call to the fire department, then let a Sister complete it while she went to warn the Community. Warning bells were rung, the novitiate called, and Sisters went from cell to cell sounding the alarm.

The floor was already hot under the novices' feet as their Mistress directed them to take their blankets and go out. They came down the north fire-escape stairway in perfect order just before the flames burst into the novitiate building.

The Professed Nuns, who were quartered in the old farmhouse, had a few more minutes warning but experienced more difficulties in coming out. A door at the foot of the stairs kept back the smoke from the second and third floors, but the thick, choking fumes, perhaps from burning insulation, beyond the door, gave the impression that the most available exit was blocked. Despite this, most of the Sisters took the chance to use this door and were soon grouped outside the burning building. A Sister suffering from thrombosis was helped down by Sister Infirmarian and by another Sister. Meanwhile one Sister had escaped by a front window, and still another had gone through a second floor window onto the low laundry roof, but broke her foot in jumping to the ground. Sister Mary Dolores, the young-

est solemnly professed nun,¹ had gone promptly to the cell of a Sister with a heart condition, put a blanket around her and led her through the dark and smoke-filled corridors to safety.

When a hasty check-up revealed one Sister missing, two solemnly professed Sisters, Sister Mary Dolores and Sister Mary Constance of Jesus, O.P. (Rella Suave of Pawtucket, R. I.), promptly asked permission to return for her. The permission was readily granted because in the few minutes which had elapsed, the fire had not reached the farm-house. In any event all of the front windows on the first or second floors could be used easily as exits.

The Sister remaining inside, Sister Mary Regina of the Rosary, O.P. (Margaret Mary Roach of Zanesville, Ohio), must have mistaken the source of the fire and thus feared to use the exit which was actually safe. The story will never be clear on earth, but apparently, thinking she was going away from the source of the fire, she climbed out of her cell window into a court instead of using a front window. The other two Sisters seem to have tried to help her back up to her second floor cell, but were overcome with smoke themselves before they succeeded.

A number of the nuns who had been preparing for bed were without stockings and were wearing only flimsy slippers. The firemen, who were helpless against the blaze, took off their socks and jackets and the Sisters gratefully donned them. The local Congregational Church, through their minister, promptly offered clothing, food, and shelter in their parish hall. Doctors and nurses volunteered service. The Sisters of Mercy in Madison, Conn., hastily prepared food and lodging. A call to the Dominican Sisters at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven met a most generous response, and soon the thirty-nine surviving nuns with their Chaplain, Rev. Reginald Craven, O.P., were aboard the bus sent from Albertus Magnus to bring them there. Father Craven had done his best to rescue the Blessed Sacrament but was unsuccessful, and although unable to reach the dying Sisters, he gave them absolution from near-by.

At Albertus Magnus College, a number of Dominican priests,

¹ Sister Mary Dolores of the Holy Angels, O.P. (Maureen McGuire of New York City), had made her solemn profession on Dec. 13, ten days before the fire. Rev. John B. Mulgrew, O.P., S.T.Lr., sang the Mass and Rev. Justin McManus, O.P., Chaplain at Albertus Magnus College, preached the sermon at the ceremony at which His Excellency, the Most Reverend John F. Hackett, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop of Hartford, presided.

including their former chaplain, Father Mulgrew, were waiting with the Dominican Sisters for the arrival of the bus. Every possible care, comfort, and kindness were offered to the weary nuns. Father McManus immediately gave them Communion (it was 12:15 a.m.) so that they could have hot coffee and food to combat shock. All that night, and during the week that followed—Christmas week—the Dominican Sisters at Albertus Magnus were untiring and completely self-sacrificing in taking care of their homeless guests. The blending of the two communities into one was a rich spiritual experience.

On the morning of December 24, by special permission the sealed caskets containing the bodies of the three who died were brought to Rosary Hall, Albertus Magnus College, for the funeral Mass. The Very Reverend Vincent Burnell, O.P., P.G., Prior of St. Mary's in New Haven, assumed financial responsibility for the funeral and made the arrangements, including permission for the Sisters to be buried in the Dominican Priests' Section of St. Lawrence cemetery until they can be transferred to the monastery cemetery in North Guilford. Archbishop O'Brien gave the blessings both after Mass and at the cemetery.

Archbishop O'Brien and Bishop Hackett returned to Albertus Magnus and spent the afternoon with the stranded Community. The fatherliness of the Archbishop, as he called the nuns together and consoled them and then promptly and generously granted full dispensation from the obligation of Divine Office as well as all other necessary dispensations, gave the nuns a sense of support which nothing else could have done. Archbishop O'Brien made arrangements with the City and State officials so that the nuns might have the use of the Walter House, an unused County Home building at 1092 Campbell Ave., West Haven, until the nuns could rebuild at North Guilford. A few simple alterations have provided the minimum requirements for cloistering, and the community has returned to its customary life.

St. Dominic must be very happy over the genuine oneness of spirit in his varied Dominican family, brought out by the response to the fire. From Rome, the Most Reverend Michael Browne, O.P., Master General of the Dominican Order, and the Very Reverend J. A. Driscoll, O.P., the American Socius, wrote their sympathy, telling of their prayers and offering assistance. The day after the fire, the Very Reverend W. D. Marrin, O.P., Provincial of St. Joseph's Province, wired the Dominican Fathers to extend all possible assistance, and later he visited the Community personally. Through

him St. Vincent Ferrer's Priory promptly provided breviaries for everyone, vestments and altar equipment, and other necessities. In the days of that first week, Dominican priests from all over the East visited the nuns to offer their sympathy personally and to help in every way.

As for the other Dominican cloisters, before the stranded nuns returned from the funeral on the morning of Dec. 24, the Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary of Union City, N. J., and the Dominican Nuns of the Monastery of Our Lady of the Rosary of Summit, N. J., had both sent truck deliveries of essential clothing and other necessities, together with substantial financial aid. Practically every Dominican Cloister in the United States, besides one in Portugal and one in Scotland, has contributed necessities and money, even to the extent of a few virtually irreplaceable choir books. To list all the Third Order Dominican Communities and the other Orders and Congregations which sent clothing, blankets, and money, some of them so poor that their gifts entailed real self-deprivation, would be to reproduce pages from the Catholic Directory.

Catholics and non-Catholics in the Archdiocese of Hartford were most generous in response to Archbishop O'Brien's moving appeal. Bishop Gerald P. O'Hara, Apostolic Delegate to England, United States Senator Prescott Bush, Governor Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, Mayor Richard E. Lee of New Haven, the Right Reverend Walter H. Gray, Episcopalian Bishop of Hartford are among those who have helped. The New Haven Council of Churches, through their president, Mr. Frederick T. Backstrom, were among the first to send sympathy. Organizations of every sort have contributed to the building fund. Local concerns have already cooperated generously in removing the debris of the ruined buildings. But the progress of a new monastery depends on the continued generosity of friends, because the nuns, despite generous help, do not have nearly the \$500,000 minimum needed for the construction of an adequate building.

The Monastery of Our Lady of Grace would have been nine years old on Jan. 21. At the end of its novena of years Our Lord accepted it as a holocaust of first fruits, completing its maturity by the sacrifice of the three Sisters. Of the three, Sister Mary Constance was a co-foundress; Sister Mary Dolores had just completed her novitiate; and Sister Mary Regina had transferred to the Monastery from the Third Order Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs, Ohio, so that in a probably unique instance, the two Communities to which she had belonged, active and cloistered, were blended at

her funeral at Albertus Magnus College. And while the Dominican Nuns sought shelter at Christmas as once a young Couple sought it at Bethlehem, the light of the flames became for Dominicans and their friends everywhere the Christmas star which directed their intense charity. In the completely burned sacristy one fragment of one page of the large Missal remained. The legible words were, "Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus."

. . . from the pen of St. Thomas . . .

The gift of piety does not merely give cult and due honor to God, but to all men inasmuch as they pertain to God . . . From this it follows that piety comes to the aid of those who find themselves in need of mercy. (*Summa*, II IIae, 121, 1, ad 3)

. . . from the life of St. Dominic . . .

In the daytime no one was more common and joyous than St. Dominic, in the midst of the brethren and his associates. But at night no one was more instant in any way in vigils and prayerful supplications . . . The day he gave to his neighbor, the night to God, knowing that the Lord commanded the day to be spent in dealing out mercy while the night's canticle belongs to Him alone. (*Legenda Petri Ferrandi*, on the life of St. Dominic)