



St. Catherine's Convent, St. Catherine, Kentucky. Where Centennial of American Dominican Sisters Was Held

DOMINICANA

New Series

JUNE, 1922

Vol. VII. No. 1

DOMINICAN SISTERS' CENTENARY

The present year marks the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the first convent of Dominican Sisters in the United States. On February 22, 1822, Father Samuel T. Wilson, O. P., made an appeal to the congregation of St. Rose's Church, Springfield, Ky., for volunteers, who would leave all for Christ's sake and devote themselves to the cause of Catholic education. Those who responded to his appeal were the nucleus of an illustrious army of teachers with which St. Catherine of Sienna Convent, Springfield, Ky., has blessed many civic communities in America. With the self-oblation of nine country maidens, Fr. Wilson laid the foundation of the splendid educational and social service institutions which the Dominican nuns in the United States have built.

On Easter Sunday, April 7, 1822, before the people of St. Rose's parish, the first reception of the Dominican Nuns' habit in this country occurred when Miss Marie Sansbury, in religion Sister Angela, with three others received from the hands of Father Wilson the "white wool of Dominic." This truly heroic and virtuous woman was destined in God's providence to rule the pioneer community as its first superioress and in this capacity to act as foundress, guide and builder.

Laudare—To Praise

Laudare (to praise), the first of three words on the Dominican standard, indicating the nature of Dominican work, found true realization in the pioneer efforts of St. Catharine's noble women. During the first few years the Nuns lived in a very small log cabin, located on the part of the Sansbury farm that bordered Cartwright Creek. In a field also donated by the Sansburys, they labored in an effort to eke out an existence. But despite the severity of its unusual manual labors the little community never neglected its religious obligations. Every night

they arose shortly after midnight to chant the praises of God. During the day they recited the canonical hours of the Divine Office, a privilege they enjoyed through a rescript of Pope Pius VII which granted "the Dominican Sisterhood about to be founded in America the privileges of Nuns of the Second Order." All their praying and praise of God was not done in the oratory, if the room that served this purpose could really be called such. In answer to the entreaties of their chaplain, they offered as a prayer to God their work in the fields. They had to cultivate the earth in order to obtain the food necessary for their sustenance. Even with this labor the larder was often empty and it was prayer that provided for their needs on many occasions.

Until 1833 the Sisters continued to do most of the farm work. By that time a sufficient number of slaves to care for the outdoor duties had been given them. During this time and long afterwards the Sisters continued to chant the Divine Office. Authority recognizing the arduous labors of the Nuns in the classrooms during the day and realizing that they were physically weakened by their shortened nocturnal rest commanded that they discontinue the recitation of the Divine Office. Today the Sisters rise early for their daily Mass and meditation and during the day they recite both the entire Office of the Blessed Virgin and Mary's Psalter. Every week the Dominican Commemoration of the Dead is solemnly celebrated.

The House of God in the past has always been the first object of improvement at St. Catharine's and now that the present chapel is becoming overcrowded, the Sisters will mark the opening of their second century of labor in the Lord's vineyard by building a noble church. The followers of Mother Angela Sansbury at St. Catharine's have always sustained Father Wilson's century old call for the spiritualizing of rugged Catholic work.

Benedicere—To Bless

To bless God and to radiate Catholic happiness have been the ideals of Dominican work. While the motto "Benedicere: To Bless" covers a wide range of Christian service, for present purposes we have in mind the devoted, constant and unselfish labors of St. Catharine's community for the alleviation of human sufferings.

In the early Thirties of the past century an epidemic of cholera swept the then sparsely settled State of Kentucky. Terror-stricken, the inhabitants of Springfield feared to approach any one stricken with the plague. The Sisters together with the Fathers from St. Rose's heroically attended the afflicted people who, in dire need, had been abandoned by relatives and friends. The Sisters labored without thought of financial recompense and their altruism was so strongly recorded that even today the descendants of those who survived the pestilence tell of their heroic services at that time.

In the Civil War the Sisters' convent often lay in the path of advances and retreats of both the Southern and Northern armies. Although the sympathy of the community for the respective causes was divided, their feelings were buried when it came to caring for the wounded soldiers brought to them. In what historians describe as the bloodiest battle ever fought in Kentucky, that at Perryville, some twenty odd miles from St. Catharine's, the Sisters acted as nurses on the open field. They were escorted to the scene of hostilities by a bodyguard of troops furnished by General Bragg. Although they left the convent early in the morning they did not return until nearly midnight. The convent possessions were often threatened and its horses were especially coveted, but no commanding officer dared to permit his men to forage on the property of the Nuns.

During the Yellow Fever epidemics in Memphis, between the years 1874-1878, the Dominican Nuns at St. Agnes', assisted by their Kentucky Sisters rendered invaluable assistance to the victims. They gave personal service in hospitals and homes, and also cooperated with "The Howard,"—a benevolent association which did much to aid the city's numerous afflicted. During these years approximately thirty Nuns laid down their lives that others might live.

In the Influenza crisis of the past decade the Sisters were again most active in alleviating suffering. Abandoning their convent homes they worked in camps and hospitals, sometimes even without Mass on Sunday. In homes from Massachusetts to Nebraska their kind and true sympathy was manifest. Although many were stricken with the illness which they so valiantly helped others to stave off, not one of these noble women of St. Catharine's succumbed.

Praedicare—To Preach

Preaching, the third duty indicated by the Dominican coat of arms, is done in two ways, by example and instruction. In both ways have St. Catharine's Nuns fulfilled their Dominican duty. The school days of St. Catharine's Congregation go back to the times of Mother Angela. She and her co-foundresses were the first pupils of St. Magdalen's school, as St. Catherine's was known until 1851. There under Fathers Wilson and John A. Hill, O. P., the Nuns not only learned the principles of Christian culture but inaugurated a system of Catholic education that has served civilization well to this day.

Shortly after their foundation the Sisters obtained an old still-house. Here on the first Monday of July, 1823, the first school in the United States to be taught by Dominican Sisters was opened with fifteen pupils. The desks and benches were made by the Sisters themselves from lumber gathered on their property. Students paid their tuition by providing their own eatables. Often the Nuns had to fast in order to feed the pupils.

The school grew rapidly and in 1825 a new building was erected. Some money was collected by the Sisters from the neighboring homes but they had to incur a debt of two thousand dollars. This weighed heavily on the young community and nearly caused its disbandment, but an indomitable spirit and trust in God carried them through the crisis until 1830, when Father Stephen Montgomery, O. P., Prior at St. Rose's, helped them liquidate the amount.

From many sections of the country came appeals to the Nuns of St. Catharine's to duplicate the work they had accomplished in Kentucky.* With inspired Dominican loyalty they drew from their meagre resources and to Somerset, Ohio, 1830, sent some Sisters who opened the second convent on property donated by the Dominican Fathers of St. Joseph's Priory. Today after nearly a century of progress this offspring of St. Catharine's is centralized at Shepard, Ohio, and is known as St. Mary of the Springs. In 1850, a third community, St. Agnes', was established at Memphis, Tennessee. In 1887 this

* The following is a list of the Mother Houses of Dominican Sisters which claim St. Catharine's as their source: St. Mary of the Springs, Shepard, Ohio; St. Cecilia Academy, Nashville, Tenn.; Academy of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Springfield, Ill.; St. Catharine's Convent, Springfield, Ky.; St. Catharine of Sienna Academy, Fall River, Mass.

community due to the ravages of yellow fever received permission to rejoin St. Catharine's. At the request of Bishop Baltes of the Alton Diocese another mission was opened at Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1873. This community shortly afterwards moved to Springfield, Illinois. All these missions were sent forth with the understanding that they would open novitiates in their respective convents.

In the last quarter of the past century the present plan of missions was effected and Sisters sent to parishes throughout the country are ruled by a local superioress who in turn is subject to the Mother General at St. Catharine's. The first mission under the new plan was sent to the colored people of Springfield, Ky., where without financial reward the Sisters labored for many years. From this time forward the growth of the missions has been rapid though without sensation. To-day the Nuns are established as teachers not only in Kentucky but throughout the United States from Massachusetts to Nebraska. In this vast territory they conduct over thirty parochial schools and seven academies. Each of the latter is affiliated with the Catholic University, Washington, D. C., and with the Universities of their respective States. Their schools are an important part of the educational systems of the Archdioceses of Chicago and Boston and of the dioceses of Alton, Louisville, Nashville, Forty Wayne, Lincoln, Omaha, Grand Rapids, Des Moines and Wheeling. The yearly attendance at these institutions approaches fifteen thousand boys and girls.

One last chapter of its history indicates the presence of Divine Providence at St. Catharine's. On January 3, 1904, in the stillness of a cold night a disastrous fire destroyed the results of eighty-two years' labor, when the entire group of buildings erected in "Sienna Vale," the motherhouse at Springfield, Ky., was burned. The Nuns with the students of the academy were left homeless. The Fathers at St. Rose's cared for all during the night, and on the following day, Sunday, appealed to the parish congregation to aid the sufferers. The people responded most generously. In Louisville, the Dominican Fathers at St. Louis Bertrand Church also announced the catastrophe to their parishioners. The news met with heartfelt sympathy amongst Catholics and non-Catholics alike. A committee was organized which collected money and articles necessary for relief. On a

train gratuitously provided by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad the relief workers went to Springfield and rendered all possible assistance. Returning they brought the pupils to Louisville as well as several aged and sick Sisters who were cared for at St. Joseph's Infirmary. The pupils were enrolled at the Sisters' academy in the city, and for the first time in its history no classes were conducted at St. Catharine's. The superioress offered the novices their freedom to go home but all of them chose to remain during this sad period.

Very often apparent misfortune is but a boon. St. Catharine's, aided by its army of friends, rose majestically from the ashes in "Sienna Vale" to unprecedented prosperity on "Sienna Heights." Although no insurance covered the loss of the old buildings, the new academy and convent erected at a cost of thousands of dollars is now free from debt. St. Catharine's was blessed in its tribulations in many ways; its sufferings and privations were a sweet prayer to the Almighty; its small frame buildings have been supplanted by a stately brick structure containing over three hundred rooms; and its benefactors were given the opportunity to pay a just debt due the Sisters many years.

—Bro. John Dominic Walsh, O. P.