

Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States – Episode 3:

Chapter 2: A New Foundation, St. Mary of the Springs

Hello, my name is Sister Susan Leslie. I minister as a Mission Group Coordinator at the Sansbury Care Center, a long-term care home for Sisters and for lay women in Central Kentucky. I've been living Dominican life for 42 years. And my name is Sister Barbara Kane. I have been a Dominican Sister of Peace for 20 years, and I am currently ministering as a Chaplain in New Haven Connecticut. In 2022, the Dominican Sisters of Peace are celebrating 200 years of Dominican Religious women in the United States.

Welcome to the third episode of “Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States.

In our last episode, we introduced you to Angela Sansbury, the founder of the Kentucky Dominicans, and her blood sister Benvin, who was also a Dominican Sister.

But Kentucky was not the end of Sr. Benvin's journey. Just eight short years after the Kentucky foundation, she and three other Sisters founded a ministry in Somerset, Ohio. The Catholic settlers in the “wild west” of Ohio were mostly Irish and German immigrants.

Bishop Edward Fenwick was the first priest to serve this parish. He and his nephew, Fr. Nicholas Dominic Young opened Holy Trinity Church, near Somerset, Ohio, in 1827. The Dominican Sisters set up their first mission at Ohio Trinity and set up a school in an old carpenter's shop.

Benvin and her companions didn't waste any time – within a month they welcomed 40 students to their new school, which they named St. Mary's.

Who were these courageous young women who agreed to leave their homes and travel into an unknown future?

Benvin Sansbury came from a well-off family and was well educated for a woman of her day, having studied English, history, and mathematics. Emily Elder was thirty years old and had professed for six years. She was elected Prioress upon their arrival.

Here's a little clarification about that word “Prioress.” A Prioress is the elected leader of a congregation of Dominican women religious. She is assisted by a group of Councilors.

While our congregation used other titles for Congregational leaders over the years, for the sake of simplicity, we will always use “Prioress” when referring to the leader of the congregation in this podcast.

Thirty-four-year-old Agnes, and Catherine, just 18, professed their vows the day they left for Ohio.

Early Americans were not always friendly to Catholics, but even non-Catholics praised the superior education their children received at St. Marys. In 1831, the Sisters opened a new boarding school to meet the growing demand of the frontier families.

They were so eager to begin that they moved into the new building before construction was complete – which turned out to be a terrible mistake. The winter of 1831 was exceptionally rainy, and the basement of the new school flooded. This meant the Sisters and students could not use the dining rooms in the basement – and the water even rose to the kitchen and pantry on the first floor! The Sisters cooked for themselves and all the students on a little grate set up on the second floor.

To make things worse, muddy, icy trails made it impossible to bring in food. A typical days menu for the Sisters and their students was potatoes and coffee for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Speaking of breakfast, the Dominican Sisters at St. Mary's had a full day before they had theirs! They woke at 3:30 am, dressed, and went to community prayer and meditation, then gathered again to say the rosary – THEN had their breakfast. The rest of the day was no less busy. Not only did they teach all day, but the Sisters also did all the manual work of cooking, washing, sewing, and gardening necessary to care for themselves and their students.

Money was often tight for these working Sisters, but they found the funds to add another floor onto the Academy building to accommodate their growing population of pupils. In 1845, construction began on a beautiful Gothic chapel to complement the three-story academy building.

It's not hard to see why the schools run by the Dominican Sisters were so popular. Young women received a comprehensive education, including French, English, writing and arithmetic, as well as art, music, and needlework. There were also advanced courses such as rhetoric, natural and moral philosophy, astronomy, mythology, botany, and chemistry.

But it wasn't just the daughters of wealthy families who received this quality education. The Sisters were dedicated to helping young girls from poor families as well. Comments in the council book, where the Congregation's business was recorded, demonstrated this commitment.

- *The Council...agreed to receive little M.E. Rene, an orphan, until she became the age of fourteen.*
- *Mother proposed whether they would be willing to receive into the school without tuition Ann Donnelly. The Council being aware of the poverty of Mr. Donnelly, unanimously agreed to take her.*
- *Mother proposed to the Council, if they thought proper, to receive into the school an orphan without the common pension, her mother being a poor widow and a Protestant, but wishes her daughter to be instructed in our holy religion. The Council, considering it a great act of charity, unanimously agreed.*

In our last episode we met the Kentucky Dominicans. Both these Southern Sisters and their daughter congregation in Ohio believed that as Dominicans, they should operate under the

jurisdiction of Dominican Friars. But in 1864, the Master General of the Dominican order, Vincent Jandel, decided that the American Dominican sisters were now to report to their local bishop.

This decision reflected the tension between the nuns of the order and the sisters of the Order. If you remember from episode one, cloistered Dominican nuns lived behind walls and ministered through prayer.

On the other hand, many US women religious were Sisters, active in ministry to their communities.

If under the jurisdiction of their local bishop, the Sisters might not be able to follow the Dominican Charism of prayer, study, service and community.

Despite this struggle within the Dominican Order, The Academy in Somerset was thriving. Sr. Rose Lynch wrote that this mission

“was entirely free from debt. It owned sufficient land to be able to raise an abundance of vegetables for their own use, to keep cows enough to make their own butter... St. Mary’s then had over 80 boarders and quite a number of day scholars...Being out of debt and raising their own provisions they were able to have a few thousand dollars, with which they determined to put up a large building in addition to their large house.”

On June 7, 1866, disaster struck. At nine o’clock in the morning, students saw that the chapel was on fire. In less than fifteen minutes, the fire was out of control. Before the fire could be extinguished, the chapel, the school, and the house that the Sisters lived in were destroyed.

Both the community of Somerset community and the Friars of St. Joseph rushed to assist the sisters. They helped them move to the nearby St. Joseph College building so that classes could continue. They also offered them space in the college until the Sisters could rebuild.

The surrounding communities saw the benefit of having the Dominican Sisters nearby. The people of Somerset offered the sisters \$10,000 to rebuild on the original site. The city of New Lexington offered a farm and \$60,000 if they would settle there. But Mr. Theodore Leonard, a businessman from the fast-growing city of Columbus, about 50 miles away, made an even better offer.

“Dear Sisters, I have 5 nieces who went to your school in Somerset, as well as my own two girls who are there now. My eldest will be a Dominican Sister soon. I know the fire was devastating, and I want to help. I will give you 20 acres of land in Columbus, and all the brick you need to rebuild.”

This was a generous offer. But the Sisters loved Somerset and leaving was a heart-breaking decision. In keeping with the Dominican tradition of democracy, the decision was put to a vote. Each Sister was given a white bean and a black bean. She was to cast the white bean to vote to move to Columbus and a black bean to stay in Somerset.

At the end of its trip around the circle of Sisters, the ballot basket held 13 white beans and four black – the Dominican Sisters were moving to Columbus.

Mr. Leonard proved a generous friend during the move. He hosted Prioress Rose Lynch and her councilors as they toured Columbus for two full days before choosing a lot bounded by Alum Creek on the east for the new School. Mr. Leonard also hired an architect and builders, at his expense.

Two years later, in 1868, the new St. Mary of the Springs Academy opened. The student roster grew quickly, from 35 on the first day to one hundred by year end, including Catholic, Protestant and Jewish girls.

Report cards from the 1860's list courses in language arts and mathematics, history and geography, botany and chemistry, astronomy and geology, logic and natural philosophy, mental and moral philosophy. In the arts, students might take piano, guitar or harp, drawing and oil painting, as well as embroidery.

The Sisters borrowed money to pay for items for the school, but often made do with the little that was available for themselves.

“One sister might be fortunate enough to have a cup for coffee in the morning while her nearest neighbor was forced to content herself with a saucer. Again, while another might have been accommodated with a knife to spread her molasses or apple butter, the sister nearest her was probably compelled to use the handle of her spoon for the same purpose, Sr. Evangela Schilder wrote.

Like the nation itself, the Congregation of St. Mary of the Springs went through many changes from 1891 to 1949. Strong and innovative women led the Congregation to serve the Catholic immigrants that poured into cities and rural areas during the late 1800's.

By 1891, Mother Vincentia Erskine had led the Congregation to serve six missions in Ohio and a seventh in New York City. By 1917, the congregation had expanded to thirteen additional schools in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New York.

Mother Vincentia was the prioress when the Congregation became a pontifical institute in 1893. If you remember from earlier in this episode, the Sisters were under the supervision of the diocesan Bishops. Now the Sisters were under the jurisdiction of the Pope, and Congregational leadership had more control over where and how sisters would minister. At that time, there were 113 professed sisters and 25 novices.

Mother Vincentia and her council recognized the value of an educational model that prepared women for college or university. In 1896, the sisters opened a “select school” in New York City in the parish of St. Vincent Ferrer. Today, Dominican Academy is considered one of the finest high schools in New York, celebrating 125 years in 2021.

Mother Vincentia also sent sisters to open another academy, St. Mary's, in New Haven, CT. Sr. Mary Ambrose Hughes remembered those early days in New Haven fondly...

"We had much fun the first year at the Academy. We had no beds but we slept on mattresses on the floor. When they came to clean the room where your bed was, you took up your bed and walked and found another floor for yourself. Beds came one day, about half the number required, so we slept two in a bed.

After a while we procured orange boxes, stood them on end and had very fine washstands. We had these stands for many years."

Mother Vincentia was a woman of vision. She was instrumental in the creation of the Congregation's constitution, which the Vatican used as a model for other American congregations. She also discussed ways to unite Dominican Congregations around the world.

This was a real foreshadowing for the Congregation, wasn't it?

It really was ... and our listeners will hear more about that on another day!

Mother Miriam Masterson, who was elected Prioress after Mother Vincentia, added more five schools.

She also established formal teacher training, which was an innovative practice at the time. Before she became prioress, Sister Miriam invited her blood sister, Miss Anna Masterson, a principal in a public school in New York City, to educate the Sisters on modern teaching methods. She continued summer courses for teaching sisters at St. Mary of the Springs and later in Braddock, PA.

In 1918 and 1919, the Spanish Flu pandemic killed nearly one-third of the world's population. Sisters and students alike were affected, and more than 20 Sisters died during this pandemic.

At the time, when a sister died in ministry, she was brought back to St. Mary's for her funeral and burial. During one terrible week, there was a funeral held on Christmas Eve, only three Sisters were able to sing for the Christmas midnight mass, and another funeral Mass was held on New Year's Day. The last victim of this first flu epidemic died on January 6, 1919, having been professed only one year.

In 1921, Sister Marita Sullivan was the first Sister in the congregation to receive a master's degree. This was the beginning of the Congregation's focus on higher education for women. Over the following twenty-five years, the Congregation of St. Mary of the Springs opened two colleges to educate Sisters and lay women alike.

Under the leadership of Mother Stephanie Mohun, the college of St. Mary of the Springs in Columbus, Ohio, opened on September 24, 1924. Ten female freshmen students in cap and gown were joined by sisters, academy students and officers of the Academy Alumnae Association.

Today, the college is known as Ohio Dominican University, which is co-ed, and offers a wide range of majors to nearly 1000 students.

One year after the founding of the college in Columbus, the congregation opened Albertus Magnus College as a “Junior Day College.” The Sisters purchased ten acres in New Haven and established a lay Board of Trustees so that Albertus could open as a Connecticut corporation. The faculty included professors from Yale and some spouses of Yale professors.

The Congregation and Mother Stephanie took significant leaps of faith as well as financial risk to grow their colleges. Like the rest of the nation, the Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs were caught unaware by the Great Depression.

Families could not afford higher education, and income from private music lessons fell off substantially. Pastors reduced or even eliminated the already modest stipends the sisters received for teaching in the parish schools.

One of the most touching sights for the Sisters of St. Mary’s was Mother Stephanie Mohun standing as a medicant, that is, a beggar, at the St. Vincent Ferrer Church in New York City in 1930. In her letter to prospective donors, Mother Stephanie wrote:

“We realize that you too have suffered but small donations from many persons will help us so we beg that you will do what you can for our Community which we believe is dear to you.

In 1934, the Congregation defaulted on their loans, and the president of Ohio National Bank threatened foreclosure. In response, Bishop James Hartley of Columbus threatened to withdraw all diocesan funds from the bank – AND to have a letter read at all Sunday Masses explaining why the sisters lost their property. To avoid being publicly shamed at every Catholic Church in the city, the bank did not foreclose, but the Sisters’ debt remained.

By the grace of God, the goodness of friends, fundraising and careful savings, the debt was refinanced, and the Sisters gained some much-needed breathing room – but financial problems continued in the East.

The lay trustees at Albertus Magnus in New Haven felt that the Congregational leadership favored St. Mary’s. The issue came to a head when the Leadership of the Congregation decided to release full-time professor Courtland Van Winkle, who was head of the English Department.

Provost Nicholas Moseley had worked hard to attract academic talent to the college. He questioned whether this might move other professors to resign. The college’s administration and lay board appealed to Mother Stephanie and the council to reconsider, and Fr. Arthur Chandler, OP, Professor of Philosophy, who had been a member of the faculty since the beginning, applied additional pressure, writing:

“Albertus Magnus is regarded by Catholic and non-Catholic educators throughout the country... not as a mere college but as a national movement for first class Catholic

education equal and superior to that given in great non-sectarian universities and colleges. Success will bring a national Renaissance in Catholic education.”

Despite the pressure, Mother Stephanie stood firm. And while Dr. Mosley did resign, thankfully, the rest of the teachers remained at Albertus, keeping the college’s academic standing intact.

Out of desperation, in March 1940, the Council began to search for another congregation to run Albertus Magnus. But just in time, the congregation was able to consolidate both the Congregational debt and the mortgages held by Albertus.

This eased the pressure enough that Albertus was able to purchase a residence to expand its dorm space. In 1946, Mother Stephanie wrote to the congregation,

“The College now has six houses, and they will certainly need them, as a letter from New Haven yesterday tells us that they already have one hundred prospective students for next year. They had at Albertus this year eighty boarders and somewhat over two hundred students in attendance.”

Like the jonquils blooming at the site of the old Motherhouse in Kentucky, the St. Mary’s Sisters began to see hope for their ministries of higher education. This was their sign from God, and they continued to do the work they believed God sent them to do.

The Sisters of St. Mary’s were not just serving God’s people in the United States. In 1923, Mother Stephanie chose six sisters to answer the Pope’s call for ministry in China. But internal strife in China caused the Sisters to wait many years to begin this foreign ministry.

When, in 1932, it was determined safe for the Sisters to go, Mother Stephanie explained that

“Sisters who go to foreign missions must be prepared for heroic sacrifice –the sublime and poignant sacrifice which Our Lord teaches when He said: “Forgive your enemies – do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you.” This applies not only to the non-baptized for whom you labor but to the religious with whom you live!”

Sisters Virginia Gordon, Hildegard Sapp, Felicia Schick, Leocadia Moore, and Rosaire Rall arrived in Foochow, China on May 26, after more than a month at sea. Their ministry included caring for children, the sick and the elderly, preparing young Catholic women for religious community life, and directing local schools. Of course, local Sisters or lay women did the actual teaching, as the St. Mary’s Sisters did not know Chinese!

After a year learning the language and culture of their new home, the sisters traveled to their mission in Kienow. The day after they arrived, the sisters opened a dispensary, and Sr. Rosaire vaccinated fifty boys for smallpox. The sisters cared for orphans and abandoned infants. They also nursed older women from the community, the beginnings of a home for the elderly. They were assisted by three *beatae*, single Chinese women who did not wish to marry and led a semi-religious life.

As more Sisters prepared to come to China, tragedy struck. Sisters Hildegard and Leocadia died within eight months of each other. The escalating war between China and Japan resulting in the bombing of Kienow, and two of the original Sisters returned to the safety of Foochow. Sr. Virginia stayed to help the Friars protect the mission.

In 1938 more St. Mary's Sisters arrived in Kienow, but conditions continued to deteriorate. The sisters moved from Kienow to the Maryknoll mission at Kweilin, near an American airbase. As Japanese troops advanced toward Kweilin in 1944, the sisters left China with other Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

Veteran sister Sr. Dorita Basbagill returned to the Chinese Mission in 1947, and three more Sisters arrived at the Kienow mission six months later. Four Chinese women who had worked as *beatae* before the war joined the congregation as Sisters Annunciata Chen, Cecilia Cheng, John Tang, and Mary Peter Wang.

But the end of this ministry was near. After the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, civil war again broke out in China. As they departed the compound in 1949, Sisters Felicia and Rosamond recounted their journey,

“People running trying to collect their children and get whatever they could carry with them. The expressions on their faces were such that you could never forget – fear, anxiety, uncertainty, despair. Our hearts were heavy as we, too, hurried along.”

The Sisters of St Mary's renewed their mission spirit in the 1960's. The Prioress, Mother Francis de Sales was deeply moved by the pleas of Pope John XXIII's request for sisters to work in Latin America. The Congregation was not ready to found a mission in Latin America, so she invited two native Latin-American Sisters to study at the College of St. Mary of the Springs at no cost, adding two additional Sisters each year for a total of eight.

By the time those first two sisters from Colombia completed their degrees in 1966, Sisters Kateri McCaffrey, Edwina Devlin, Dorothy Lemon and Catherine Allen were on their way to Chimbote, Peru.

In just one year, the sisters provided catechetical instruction to over 5,000 children in 23 schools.

They also prepared dozens of First Communion and Confirmation classes. Since religion was required in all primary and secondary schools at the time, the sisters opened an office to provide free courses in scripture and theology to over 200 teachers.

After several sisters trained in nursing arrived, the Friars started a health clinic in Barrio San Pedro. Sisters Catherine Malya Chen and Adele Montoya brought much-needed health care to the homes of the poor around the mission.

In May 1970, an earthquake hit Chimbote in May 1970. By God's grace, all the St. Mary's Sisters survived. Sister Catherine Malya Chen described the experience.

“We heard that the nurses and doctors from La Caleta General Hospital, the poorest hospital in Chimbote, abandoned their patients to rush home to their families... We and four Irish Christian Brothers took over the chaotic situation in La Caleta Hospital. People were screaming from pain and fear, and blood was everywhere.”

The sisters would stay in Chimbote for nearly a half a century after the earthquake.

The Sisters at St. Mary’s also ministered in Bolivia, Honduras and at the Mexican border, but those are stories we will share with you another episode.

From their early days on the frontier to missions around the world, the Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs had faced wilderness and plague, financial ruin and war. But they continued to pray, to innovate, and to carry on the work that God had sent them to do. The Sisters always looked for signs of hope and held firm to the words of Mother Stephanie Mohun, who wrote to Sr. Isabel Oger, then president of Albertus: “Just put your entire trust in God, my dear Child, and go on courageously with your great work; plan everything for the future as if you had a million-dollar endowment. In fact, you have something more secure – faith and trust in the Providence of God.”

In our next episode of Building Peace – 200 Years of Catholic Nuns in the United States, we head to New York City, then to Europe to travel with Lucy Eaton Smith as she discerns her own call from God.

If you have any questions about the terms you have heard in this episode, please visit us at OPPeace.org – that’s the letter O, the letter P, and the word PEACE, dot o-r-g. There you will find all our podcast episodes as well as information on the ministries of the Dominican Sisters of peace today.

Until next time, I am Sister Susan Leslie, and I am Sister Barbara Kane, and we’d both like to thank you for joining us for this episode of Building Peace – 200 Years of Catholic Nuns in the United States.