



## **Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States**

### **Episode 2: Signadou, A Sign from God: The Kentucky Dominicans**

*Featuring Sr. Charlene Moser, OP, and Sr. Barbara Rapp, OP*

Hello, I'm Sister Charlene Moser. I am a Dominican Sister of Peace. I have been a vowed religious Sister for 55 years. I currently live in Louisville, KY, where I work with our ministries around the country to raise funds through grants. I am joined today by Sr. Barbara Rapp.

Hi Charlene! Yes, I am Sr. Barbara Rapp. I have been a vowed religious Sister for almost 54 years, and I currently work in parish ministry in Leetonia, a little town in Northeast Ohio.

As members of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, Charlene and I would like to welcome you to the second episode of "Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States.

Sr. Paschala Noonan, OP, opened her history of the Kentucky Dominican Sisters with these words...

Unlike some congregations, we have no words of inspiration passed on to us from our foundresses to cherish and preserve. No diaries exist; no letters remain for us...however, it is not surprising, but typically Dominican.

Saint Dominic was a preacher, not a writer, who left compositions consisting of the First Constitutions of the Order and only three other letters.

Like Dominic and his early colleagues, the Dominican Sisters of the St. Catharine congregation were do-ers, not writers...as Preachers they 'gave to others the fruits of their contemplation'.

Unfortunately, most of the records documenting the sisters' early days were lost in the devastating fire of 1904, which destroyed most of the written materials (of almost 82 years), with the exception of the reception/profession book, which was rescued from the fire.

Despite that limitation, information abounds from oral histories, archives of the Dominican Fathers, letters of Bishop Fenwick, OP, and other resources.

With this in mind, we begin our story...

In the early days of our republic, in the late 1700's, clusters of Catholics from English-speaking Maryland settled in a tri-county area of Central Kentucky that became known as the Kentucky Holy Land.

At almost the same time, four Dominican Fathers settled in Kentucky's Washington County, just outside of what is now Springfield. In 1805 they founded St. Rose Priory and St. Thomas College, and Prior Father Thomas Wilson, OP, asked the women of St. Rose Parish to help educate the local children.

But Father Wilson was not just looking for trained teachers. He asked these parish women to consider entering religious life for the specific purpose of opening a school. There was a possibility that these new Sisters might be required to enter a cloister later, but right now, they were needed in this growing community.

Father Wilson was asking these women to pioneer a new form of Dominican life, outside of the traditional cloisters of European Dominican women. These new Sisters would serve their community and support not just their ministries, but themselves. These Dominican women were among the first to accept an innovative apostolic life, serving the frontier families who were their neighbors by providing education as well as religious guidance.

Nine pioneering women answered this call to consecrated life during a mass at St. Rose Church on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1822. On that day, twenty-eight-year-old Mariah Sansbury received the habit and took the religious name Sr. Angela.

Just nine months later, Sr. Angela was given dispensation to take her final vows and became the first constitutionally elected Dominican prioress in the United States. That was a tremendous

responsibility for a woman less than a year into her religious life, but Angela Sansbury was certainly up for the task.

Photos of Sister Angela show calm eyes, and a sweet, gentle smile in a soft face. It would have been easy to believe that Sister Angela Sansbury would be compliant, willing to go where and do what she was told. But as we will see, it would be a mistake to underestimate the resolve of this young woman and her companions.

The official name of this first Dominican Congregation in the United States was St. Mary Magdalene, but they came to be known as the Kentucky Dominicans.

Life in that first log-cabin convent, which the sisters called Bethany, was crowded, and the sisters soon moved to a farm which had been owned by the family of Sr. Angela Sansbury and her blood sister, Sr. Benveniste, who had entered religious life with Angela in 1822. The farm, located on the banks of Cartwright Creek, was also closer to St. Rose Church. There they established the first permanent Dominican convent in the United States, as well as the first Dominican school. And it was there that the Dominican Spirit of prayer, study, community, and service began to flourish in the new nation.

The school opened in July 1823 with 15 students, housed in a 'still house' formerly used for making bourbon. The little building was surrounded by yellow jonquils, whose cheerful blooms celebrated the coming of each spring with the Community.

But it wasn't long before this new Congregation faced its first real challenge.

In 1824, Sr. Angela's mentor and co-founder, Father Wilson and was replaced by Bishop Fenwick, OP, of Cincinnati. The school was growing fast, and the sisters chose to expand – which meant they had to take on new debt. They went to the families of the St. Rose parish to finance that debt.

Bishop Fenwick did not approve of the obvious poverty of the sisters, and wrote to the leader of the Dominican Order, the Master General, in Rome for permission to disband the new Dominican Community. He planned to sell the Congregation's property to pay their debts, and send the sisters back to their homes, or to sell the land and bring the sisters to minister in Cincinnati.

But Bishop Fenwick had underestimated the determination of the women of this new Congregation. In response to his request, Sr. Angela replied:

“We will not agree to such a tragedy, for we know it was God who called us to religious life. Father Wilson secured the approval of the Holy See for us, and as long as the community is faithful to the purpose for which it was organized, it cannot be disbanded without the consent of the same community. Best of all, the sisters are happy in their religious vocation, and joyous in the service of God.”

The sisters had placed their trust in God and intended to chart their own path. They continued to ask for donations from the local community, sold some of their furniture; and worked as laundresses for the friars until the debt was paid in full.

The year 1830 found the sisters poorer, but debt-free, and looking toward the future with renewed courage and hope... as well as with the Dominican spirit of itinerancy! The Congregation's second Mother Superior, Magdalene Edelen, sent four sisters from the Kentucky community to Somerset, OH, to establish their first mission, which became St. Mary of the Springs. Among those four Sisters was Sister Benven Sansbury, Sr. Angela's blood sister. This community later moved to Columbus Ohio... but that's a story for another day.

In 1832, in true Dominican fashion, the sisters of the St. Mary Magdalene Congregation expanded their ministry to serve the most pressing need of the day, nursing the sick during a deadly outbreak of flu. Bishop Flaget of near-by Bardstown recognized the importance of this new ministry.

The Sisters of the third Order of St. Dominic deserve as much public recognition as the sisters of Charity and Sisters of Loretto. With only 10-11 Sisters in the community, they used holy industry to multiply their resources and to render service to the sick in the district surrounding their monastery... For several weeks one saw them everywhere, night and day, in homes with the greatest number of sick and where misery had reached its peak... not one of them nor their companions died, but all were exhausted beyond what can be imagined.

The Congregation's next foundation sent three Sisters from Kentucky and three others from the foundation in Ohio to Memphis, TN. In 1851, they also founded St. Agnes Academy, the first

Catholic girls' academy in the state of Tennessee. Sr. Agnes Academy has survived both war and plagues over its long history and celebrated its 160th anniversary in 2021.

Speaking of plagues, our Memphis Sisters became nurses during the Civil War, caring for soldiers and civilians during the almost-annual surges of yellow fever that ravaged the city until the 1890's. Nearly 640 Sisters served as nurses during the Civil War, including 16 named as Dominican Sisters at St. Agnes and 24 at St. Catharine. After the bloody battle of Perryville on October 8, 1862, Sisters cared for soldiers from both sides in the St. Catharine Motherhouse, risking their own lives to take the dead to Lebanon Cemetery for burial. The Catholic Hospital Association recognized Kentucky Dominicans who served during the Civil War in 1961.

Many sisters died nursing yellow fever patients, including eight who died in 1878 alone. One of the heroes of the 1878 plague was Sr. Thomas O'Meara, the only sister untouched by the disease. She alone nursed the sick, said the prayers for the dead, and took deceased sisters by wagon to their final resting place.

That last crisis eventually led to a vote to re-unite the Memphis community with the St. Catharine community due to their diminished numbers. But with the passing of the 'yellow jack,' the sisters returned to their work in Memphis. They opened additional schools for white and Black students, and orphanages for both. In gratitude for their service, for many years after the war, no sister in Memphis had to pay for public transportation.

As we discuss the Civil War, we must also acknowledge that slavery existed in the South and in neutral Kentucky. The pre-war census of Washington County indicates the number of enslaved persons on the grounds of St. Catharine and their ages, but not their names. Catholic slavery was the same as other slavery, and for this sin and injustice the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and the Sisters of Loretto made a public apology to the African American community in the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bardstown, in December 2000. Hundreds attended this somber, prayerful, and very necessary service. The Congregation will also take part in "I Was Here," an augmented reality art installation honoring African Americans in American history. The ceremony will take place in October 2022.

In 1872, just seven years after the end of the Civil war, the congregation celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Immigration had increased the size of the Catholic population in the country over the past 50 years. Religious congregations were growing, and requests for sisters for parish schools was escalating. St. Catharine was no exception, with many requests for teachers from across the nation.

In 1873 St. Catharine's Mother Regina O'Meara,

Charlene – I have to ask...Is she related to Sr. Thomas O'Meara of Memphis?

She is! She was her blood Sister.

Mother Regina received a request from the Bishop of Jacksonville, Illinois. She agreed to send Sisters to Springfield, but specified that this would be an independent community, no longer a part of St. Catharine. The Bishop did not respond, so Mother Regina was shocked when a pastor arrived five months later to ask for the sisters his Bishop had promised him!

Mother Regina, her councilors, and the Chaplin quickly discerned, and within two days, six sisters were chosen to go to Illinois. Sadly, these sisters were not informed of the terms stated in the original letter, and it wasn't until 12 months later that they realized that were no longer officially part of their 'old Kentucky Home.'

The surprise and pain felt by these sisters were deep, and healing took years. At the St. Catharine Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Mother Josephine, one of the original foundresses of the Springfield Community, came with her companion to St. Catharine to celebrate with her Dominican Sisters, signifying an end to this separation.

As the sisters celebrated their Diamond Jubilee, the Congregation experienced something unique - no war, no plagues, and Sisters from far-flung foundations had returned for the celebration. The aging convent had been replaced and a new Academy had also been built in the valley. Old facilities had been replaced, old feelings of separation had been laid to rest, and a new century was dawning.

On January 3, 1904, less than seven years after the Diamond Jubilee, the sisters' resolve was tested again when a fire started at the St. Catharine Motherhouse. Gone were 82 years of

buildings, art works, the library and almost all institutional documents. What was left, by the grace of God, were all the sisters – there were no deaths in the fire - and their unshakable faith.

The sisters were overwhelmed with offers of help from former students, from other congregations of women and men, and from near-by parishes in Louisville and other states. Students were transferred to the community's Holy Rosary Academy in Louisville, and Sisters in formation were granted permission to move more rapidly through the process and leave on mission, since there was no place for them to live. Meanwhile, Mother Agnes Hunt and her Council remained in a small house in the Valley in a small house to plan for the future.

Despite various offers for a new home, the sisters decided to rebuild on congregational land, on the highlands where anyone could walk to the original site. The Sisters felt their decision was blessed when, that spring, the jonquils bloomed again in the valley. The Kentucky Dominicans took the reappearance of the jonquils as a their "signadou," or "sign from God," just as Saint Dominic had recognized lights in the sky as a sign from God centuries before. The ashes did not have the final word, and rebuilding began in 1905.

But the Dominican Sisters were not just building a new home in Kentucky. The Sisters moved East to Watertown, Massachusetts and west, into Nebraska and Iowa, where they founded academies and parish schools. In all, the Kentucky Dominican Sisters founded or co-founded more than 100 schools and academies in 13 states and Puerto Rico.

By 1918, the sisters again answered the call to leave the classroom and respond to the need of the moment for nurses. The Spanish flu was raging – more than 5 and one half million people in the US died that year. Sisters worked at Camp Zachary Taylor in Louisville, and in small mining towns in Eastern Kentucky.

One sister wrote in her journal that she found great joy in nursing, and this seemed to be true among much of the Congregation. From the 1920's through the 1960's, the community opened four rural hospitals. There were two each in Kentucky and Nebraska, plus a nursing home in Lebanon, Kentucky, and Sansbury Care Center, a long-term care center for ill and aged Sisters and local lay women.

The Ku Klux Klan reared its ugly head at our rural hospital in McCook, Nebraska, in July 1923. A 39-foot cross was set ablaze in front of the hospital and men dressed in white robes surrounded

the fiery cross. But the sisters were not to be deterred – they continued their work. It was later determined that this had been a general attack on the Catholic church, not on the sisters specifically, but this act of hate was frightening to all.

During these early years of the twentieth century, the Kentucky Sisters also began to found ministries in higher education. Siena College was established in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1924, and St. Catharine College, next door to the Motherhouse in 1931. In 1948, Sisters began ministry at Collegio San Carlo in Puerto Rico, now a college prep academy, and at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce, where Sisters worked with other congregations to help provide a sound education. But there were big changes on the way, affecting Sisters all over the world.

The Directives of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, did not just change the way that lay people in the church would worship – it required congregations to begin a period of renewal as well.

Vowed religious sisters began to develop an understanding of ministry as world-oriented as compared to Church-oriented, and Dominicans, already accustomed to ministry to the needs of the world, were ready for the change.

The Kentucky Dominicans held their first Chapter, or Assembly, in 1966. At that event, more 2,700 proposals were presented for study and action. Some Sisters were intimidated by the changes in internal structures and personal freedoms for the sisters, where others embraced the expanded opportunities for innovative new ministries and involvement in Social Action. Some examples of these outward facing ministries include:

- In the mid 1960's Memphis, Sisters walked with Martin Luther King at the time of the historic Garbage Men's Strike; one joined in the fast, and some say that one sister went to jail for one night.
- The Congregation invited lay people to become aligned with the mission by establishing an Associates Program. As described by CARA, The Center for Applied Research of the Apostolate, at Georgetown University, Associates are lay individuals who seek to live in close association with a religious institute, supporting the group through donations, ministry and prayer, without joining as vowed members. The



program was launched in 1976, and the first Associate made their commitment in 1980. Today there are more 650 associates of the Dominican Sisters of Peace living around the world.

- Sister Virginia Smith, teaching in Vietnam in 1974, forged a new collaboration. Eight Vietnamese Dominican sisters came to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and during the 1976 Chapter, the Kentucky Sisters voted to accept these sisters into the Congregation.

Today, there are 13 Vietnamese sisters in the Dominican Sisters of Peace, serving all over the country as social workers, catechists, nurses, and scientists.

This model of intercultural living contrasts with the current cultural and racial division in the United States, but we continue to model peace in our everyday lives.

- At the same time, two sisters began a ministry in Peru. They joined a team working in to provide food and nutritional education and health care.
- Another sister served for years as an “Itinerant Counselor” in Mexico and various parts of Central America, and knew Sr. Diana Ortiz, an Ursuline Sister and missionary in Guatemala, who was abducted, raped and tortured by members of the Guatemalan military.

Some of these sisters in international mission returned home, while others remained in their ministries for many years. Others were called home by their election to Congregational leadership, bringing the wisdom gained from their work in Belize, Central America, and even Jerusalem.

As a result of Vatican II, in October 1988, the Kentucky community began creating, approving and issuing a series of Corporate Stances on the social issues of the day. There were 15 corporate stances issued until the community became part of the Dominican Sisters of Peace in 2009. The newly formed Congregation initiated its own list of corporate stances, as well as Congregational Commitments that are reviewed and refreshed at each Congregational Chapter, which takes place every 6 years.

Among the Kentucky Dominicans’ corporate stances were:

- Opposition to the Death Penalty
- Preservation of health benefits for people over 40

- Support of Legislation to protect the Civil Rights of homosexuals,
- Opposition to military interventions and wars and to landmines in Iraq,
- Common sense gun control
- Care of creation.

St. Catherine of Siena, a Dominican Saint and Doctor of the Church, wrote “Speak the truth with a thousand tongues, for it is silence that kills the world.” The Kentucky Dominicans took this to heart, founding a national movement to protest capital punishment called “For Whom the Bells Toll.” It encouraged people of faith to mark each federal execution by the tolling of church bells or draping church doors in black. Other such “Catherine of Siena” actions have been attendance at stockholder meetings, at boycotts, at peaceful protests and marches and more.

Today, The Dominican Sisters of Peace Sisters are involved in many justice actions, including the Laudato Si Action Platform, a collaboration between the Vatican, international Catholic organizations, and lay people around the world with the aim of caring for and healing God’s precious creation, Earth. Sr. Claire McGowan of the Kentucky Dominicans founded New Pioneers for a Sustainable Future, a Bardstown, KY, non-profit that promotes sustainable thinking and sustainable development. The Dominican Sisters of Peace also founded Ecology Education Centers in Ohio, Kansas, and of course, at St. Catherine Farm, in the fields and hills where Angela and Benvin Sansbury grew up, took their religious vows, and served God’s people.

Even as we celebrate the Bicentennial of Dominican Women in the United States, the Dominican Sisters of Peace continue to preach the Gospel of Peace by responding to the needs of God’s people around us.

In our next podcast, we will look at the first mission of the Kentucky Dominicans, as they traveled Zane’s Trace to Ohio and founded the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary’s.

Remember, you can find out more about our Podcast, “Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States, at our website at [OPPeace.org](http://OPPeace.org). That’s the letter O, the letter P, and the word “Peace,” [OPPeace.org](http://OPPeace.org). You’ll also find past episodes of this podcast, photos from our archives, and new about how our sisters are building peace today.

I'm Sister Charlene Moser, and I appreciate your spending his time with us to learn about the history of Dominican Women in Kentucky. I hope that you found these stories of innovation, courage and resilience as inspirational as we always have!

Thanks, Charlene! I'm Sister Barb Rapp, and we both hope that you will join us soon for the next episode of Building Peace: 200 Years of Dominican Catholic Nuns in The United States.