



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

### **Episode 1: Introduction, and a little “Nun-speak”**

*Featuring Sr. June Fitzgerald, OP, and Sr. Ana Gonzalez, OP*

On Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009, seven twinkling flames united to form one blazing light. Seven small waters combined to create a sea. The Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, KY; The Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary from Akron, OH; The Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs from Columbus, OH; The Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, KS; The Congregation of St. Rose of Lima from Oxford, MI; The Dominican Sisters of St. Mary’s and the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic, both from New Orleans, LA, - each a pioneering congregation in their own right - created a union to become the Dominican Sisters of Peace.

You didn’t see this on CNN or read about it in America Magazine. It may not even have been reported in your local diocesan paper. But the creation of the Dominican Sisters of Peace was among the largest unions of Dominican religious congregations in the United States in modern Catholic history. It brought together religious Sisters of various ages and ethnicities from around the country and even around the world. The ministry work represented by these seven congregations included preaching, education, health care, poverty alleviation, social justice, ecology, prison ministry, overseas ministry, and more.

In 2012, the union grew by one as the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de’ Ricci, a congregation founded specifically to encourage and strengthen spirituality among lay women, merged with the Dominican Sisters of Peace.

But this wasn’t the beginning of the story of the Dominican Sisters of Peace – nor is it the end. The story of these eight congregations of religious women, as well as all Dominican Sisters in the United States, began 200 years ago, when in 1822, Elizabeth and Mariah Sansbury, two

sisters who lived in the frontier of Kentucky responded to a request for service to the pioneers by entering the Dominican Order as religious Sisters. They took the religious names Angela and Benvenista and created the first community of Dominican Sisters in the fast-growing United States of America.

THAT is the beginning of our story – and that is the story that we plan to share with our new podcast, *Building Peace – 200 Years of Pioneering Catholic Nuns in the United States*.

My name is Sr. Ana Gonzalez, and I am a Dominican Sister of Peace. I took my perpetual vows in 2021, and I also work as a Coordinator for International Admissions for Albertus Magnus College, a college founded by the Dominican Sister of Peace.

And I am Sr. June Fitzgerald. I have been a Dominican Sister of Peace for 30 years, and I am the Director of our Vocations team, which means I work with women who want to enter religious life as members of our congregation. The Dominican Sisters of Peace is a congregation of more than 350 vowed religious women working in 29 dioceses in the United States and in Nigeria. Sr. Ana and I live in the same community, at our house of Discernment in New Haven, Connecticut.

Before we begin our story, we would like to tell you a few things about religious women and the structure of the Catholic Church that will help you understand the details of our history more fully. You might already know a lot of this if you are a priest, a nun, or a Sister, but we want EVERYONE who listens to our story to be able to understand it, so we're going to give you a little course in "nun-speak."

Sister June is going to begin by telling you a little about the Dominican Order, the order to which the Dominican Sisters of Peace belongs.

In the Catholic church, an "order" is a community of people who have taken solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in dedication to the work of God and the Church. There are 39 separate orders in the Catholic church, broken into four categories:

Canons Regular, Monastic, Mendicant And Clerics regular.

Thanks Sr. Ana! Dominicans, along with Franciscans and Carmelites, who you may also have heard of, are part of the MENDICANT category of religious orders. Mendicants adopt a lifestyle of poverty, traveling, and living in urban areas for purposes of preaching, evangelization, and ministry, especially to the poor. Today's Dominicans live in both rural and urban communities, depending upon the ministry that they serve.

The Dominic Order was founded by Dominic de Guzman, a Spanish friar who ministered in Southern France during a time of religious heresy that was being spread by a group called the Cathars. The Cathars believed that whatever concerned the body—such as eating, drinking, and procreation - was evil. They denounced much of God's creation and even life itself.

Dominic was concerned for the souls of the Cathars and asked the Pope if he could work at converting them to the Catholic faith. The pope initially refused since the church had already sent priests to combat this heresy. But those priests, who rode into town wearing rich robes and attended by servants, were not accepted by the Cathars, who believed that such finery was sinful.

The Pope, at a loss for what should be done to sway the Cathars back to the Church, decided to try something new, and Dominic began his mission, tramping the roads of southern France in bare feet, adopting the same austere lifestyle as the people to whom he preached.

During this time, Dominic also set up a convent for nine women who had converted from Catharism to Catholicism. He was deeply concerned for the needs of the time in which he lived ... the needs of the current world.

Dominic's order was unique in the church at the time because of its emphasis on preaching and evangelization. In the Catholic church, priests were assigned to specific churches and acted as parish administrators and as spiritual shepherds. Friars, like Dominic and his brothers, lived in monasteries and devoted themselves to lives of prayer. Dominic was a new kind of friar, a preaching friar. This dedication to preaching was so essential to the Dominican Order that it is known as Order of Preachers, and Dominican Brothers and Sisters all use the abbreviation OP as part of their formal names.

To this day, Dominicans respond to the needs of the times with prayer, preaching and service. In 1822, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine responded to the need for education on the Kentucky frontier. In 1902, the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, KS, responded to the need for improved health care in the rural plains states. And today, the Dominican Sisters of Peace respond to the needs for care of the Earth, justice for the marginalized, including women and immigrants, and poverty alleviation, among other causes.

Now if you are Catholic, you probably have a big question at this point in our introduction. Given that most Catholics have only seen men – priests, friars, and the occasional deacon – preach at Mass, where do women fit into the order of Preachers?

As Sr. June said earlier, one of the first things that Dominic did as part of his preaching mission was found a Convent in Prouille, France. In fact, he built this this convent in 1206 – a full decade before the official founding of the friars Dominican order.

This convent housed nine women who had been converted from the Cathar religion. Today's Dominican women follow the lead of Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles, who first witnessed the resurrection of Christ and told the disciples the good news. Like Mary, Dominican Sisters preach the Gospel – or good news – of Christ in word and in deed. Dominican Sisters of Peace demonstrate the love of Christ through our ministries to help those around us – the poor in spirit and the economic poor – with housing, education, healthcare, and more.

The Dominican order was officially founded in 1216. Dominic formed two schools of theology, and his friars were known for their dedication to study. Dominican friars and Sisters have been involved in education for centuries, and the Dominican Sisters of Peace still have ministries of education today.

Now that you have some understanding of the Dominican ORDER, let's look at religious CONGREGATIONS.

Religious orders are divided into Congregations. These congregations are often very similar in makeup and ministry but may answer to different authorities within the hierarchy of the church.

Diocesan congregations, technically known as “institutes” are local, and answer to the Bishop of their diocese. Pontifical congregations are recognized by and answer only to the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church on Earth.

The Dominican Sisters of Peace are a CONGREGATION within the Dominican Order. We are a PONTIFICAL congregation, so we are responsible to the Vatican and the Pope. This is an important distinction that you will hear more about in later episodes... but don't worry, we'll include information about this on our website as well.

A second important point to be explained is the difference between Nuns – a term most of us have heard in relationship to consecrated women religious – and Sisters.

The term NUN is considered interchangeable, but Religious SISTERS hold a unique role in the church. Nuns tend to be “cloistered,” a word that literally means “kept away from the outside world.” They live in convents or monasteries, leading a life of prayer, study and contemplation.

Religious sisters like myself, Sr. June, and other members of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, are “apostolic” – meaning that, like the original 12 Apostles in the Bible, we live and minister in the world. These ministries take many forms, but the Dominican Sisters of Peace have been most active in education, ecology, health care, and spirituality.

If this podcast drives you to look at our website at [OPPeace.org](http://OPPeace.org), you'll also see that most of us do not wear habits. Like Dominic himself, who dressed simply and walked from place to place to be more like those to whom he preached, most religious Sisters, especially after the changes of Vatican II, dress more like those we serve. We believe that the idea is not to set ourselves apart by our looks or how we dress, but rather, by our actions...by how we love and serve the people of God.

The story of the Dominican Sisters of Peace is the story of our nation – of vowed religious women responding to the needs around them with faith, prayer, hope, and sacrifice, but also with bravery, resilience, resourcefulness, and strength.

Over the next weeks you will hear the stories of each of the eight congregations that make up the Dominican Sisters of Peace, from Sisters on the frontier of a young nation to Sisters in poor urban areas, Sisters teaching in schools, nursing soldiers during the Civil War, caring for victims of worldwide pandemics, traveling abroad to fight poverty and disease, growing food to feed the hungry and marching with leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Junior.

You hear these voices from the pens and keyboards – and often, in the voices – of our Sisters... Sisters who range in age from 35 to 110, and who come from various cultures around the world. Not every podcast will be a story – some may be interviews, and others may be conversations between Sisters. You’ll probably hear a few prayers, more than a little music – and hopefully, some laughter. Because just as St. Dominic was known as the Joyful Friar, the Dominican Sisters of Peace has been described as full of prayer and full of joy.

We are so grateful that you have taken the time to listen to this introductory episode of Building Peace. And we hope that you will continue to listen as our story unfolds, so please follow Building Peace on your favorite podcast app.

Why should you click that “follow” button?? If you grew up Catholic and can count Sisters or Nuns among your teachers at school or at church, this podcast is for you.

If you are interested in the history of women who contributed to the building of our nation, this is a great podcast for you. Dominican women helped build schools, colleges, hospitals, and social institutions all over the United States.

We hope that you will join us on this journey from the hills of Kentucky to the suburbs of Boston, from the hill country of Vietnam to the deserts of Nigeria. To follow a group of pioneers who became innovators, creating a new way of life for religious women in the United States, a new standard of education for young people, and finally, a new way of living in community.

Again, I am Sister June Fitzgerald, and I am Sr. Ana Gonzalez, with the Dominican Sisters of Peace. Welcome to Building Peace – 200 Years of Pioneering Catholic Nuns in the United States. We hope that our story will be blessing to you.