

**“Jonquils and Other Brave Blossoms:
Dominican Women Preaching Justice in North America”**

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Eighty-two years after their foundation, the Sisters of the first Dominican apostolic congregation in the USA suffered an overwhelming loss: their motherhouse, academy – everything they’d built over the years – burned to the ground in a devastating fire. Sister Pascal Noonan states: "January 1904 left St. Catharine a mass of blackened ruins. With the Sisters scattered, the students dispersed and the residents living in cramped unsuitable conditions, the future seemed bleak. But in March the jonquils, the March lilies, raised their golden heads all over the desolate valley. Jonquils are hardy They persevere and spread out. Wild and survivors, they were a symbol of hope, a *signadou* (*seen-ya-doo*) (sign from God), to the Kentucky Dominicans who themselves are a bit wild and definitely survivors. Once again the Sisters set about rebuilding convent and school."

These first Dominican Sisters in the USA were daughters of the Catholic families who began to migrate to Kentucky in the 18th century in order to escape decades of persecution in Maryland. In the early 19th century, Dominican Edward Fenwick OP was sent by Bishop John Carroll to minister to the Catholic settlement in Kentucky. After founding the first province of US Dominican Friars there, Fr. Fenwick, together with Dominican Samuel Wilson OP, recognized the need for a community of Dominican Sisters to teach the children of the settlers. Nine women from the settlement responded to this invitation and their first prioress, Mother Angela Sansbury -- the first woman received into the Kentucky foundation in 1822 -- is the matriarch for Dominican apostolic congregations in North America.

Like the jonquils after the fire, the hardy, perseverant and sometimes “wild” qualities of these first Dominican Sisters in North America also characterize the other congregations of Dominican Sisters who spread like wildflowers across the continent in the following 176 years. With the resilience of the Red Carnations of

Ohio and the Wood Violets of Wisconsin, the first Dominican Sisters in those States were also daughters of immigrant families responding to the educational needs of pioneer children of Catholics and non-Catholics in the mid-19th century.

Nearly thirty years and three US-founded Dominican congregations later, the first Dominican Sister from Europe arrived in North America in 1851. A brave Dominican Novice, Sister Mary Goemaere, traveled with Dominican Bishop Alemany all the way from France to the far western edge of the continent where golden California Poppies welcomed her. Sister Mary and her Sisters first responded to educational needs but next responded to the health care needs of settlers in the western States. In 1853, four Dominican Sisters from Germany arrived at the other side of the continent – in the east -- and planted, not a flower, but a tree: “The Regensburg Tree,” a metaphor for the eleven additional US congregations that sprouted from this first New York congregation. Farther north on the continent where Blue Irises flourish, a group of women Dominican Tertiaries came together as an apostolic community in 1887 in Quebec under the leadership of Sr. Catherine Philomène. A vibrant, Dominican garland of education, health care and other services -- including responding to the spiritual needs of women and care of orphans -- was spreading throughout the continent by the early 20th century.

In the mid-20th century, under the direction of a committee of Bishops in the US, Dominican Sisters developed a comprehensive curriculum for teachers that integrated Catholic Social Teaching with US Catholic education at elementary, secondary, and university levels. This series was entitled *Guiding Growth in Christian Social Living*. As part of this initiative, Dominican Sisters also prepared a series of readers for US elementary Catholic school children. These *Faith and Freedom Readers* related the social teachings of the Church to the lives of the children, and indirectly to their parents.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, there were hundreds of local communities of Dominican Sisters in North America,

announcing the Good News of God's tender compassion – that is, preaching the Gospel – through their apostolic works. The primary focus of most congregations was contributing to the establishment of those conditions to which human beings have a right, namely education and health care, as described in Articles #25 and #26 of the UDHR. Education was provided at every level: elementary, secondary and higher. Health care was available in large cities and in remote, rural locations.

The Sisters' services contributed to significant changes in society as immigrants' children and grandchildren became contributing and productive citizens as a result of better education and health care. This reality demonstrates an important distinction: responding to immediate human needs (hunger, shelter, clothing, etc.) is not the same as working to change the systems that create injustices in society. This distinction may be understood as the difference between charity and justice, the difference between works of mercy and works that change oppressive social systems. Pope Pius XI stated in *Divini Redemptoris* (1937): *“Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice.”* Although there is an essential relationship between charity and justice, they are not the same. Working for justice involves changing systems, structures, institutions and public policies that are the root causes of social injustices. The Gospel demands that followers of Jesus walk with both these “feet:” the two feet of charity and justice.

Today, we participate in the launching of *Preaching Justice II*. This publication intends to describe some of the contributions that Dominican Sisters have made to the creation of ethical societies around the world. In light of this title and the anniversary that this conference celebrates, it is important to emphasize the work for justice by Dominican Sisters. Of course, it is not possible to include here all the diverse ways in which the approximately 6,000 Dominican Sisters in thirty-four congregations now ministering in the US and the eight congregations ministering

in Canada continue to work for human rights, but here are some examples of their efforts:

Articles 1 and 2 of the UDHR proclaim that all persons share the same human dignity and are entitled to the same rights. In the US, women obtained the right to vote as recently as 1920; in Quebec, this right did not come until 1940. The struggle to convince peoples of the world that women's rights are human rights continues. From their beginnings, Dominican Sisters in North America, along with other congregations of women religious, have empowered women. This empowerment was intrinsic to congregations as the women who became Sisters were educated, earned advanced degrees in fields open primarily to men, directed schools and hospitals, and eventually managed the administration and finances of complex educational and health care systems. Dominican Sisters continue to empower women in a variety of ways. Some of these include supporting those escaping situations of domestic violence, educating those working for basic literacy, and assisting those seeking decent housing for their children and themselves.

Article 4 denounces slavery. The major current form of slavery in our world today is human trafficking. This trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force or fraud, for the purpose of subjecting that person to involuntary servitude or slavery. Many Dominican congregations have adopted "corporate stances" against human trafficking. (A "corporate stance" is a focused statement concerning an issue, voted upon by members of congregations, and announced publicly as the official position of the congregation on that issue.) Through these stances on trafficking, congregations commit themselves to study, awareness raising and collaboration with others in order to confront this new slavery.

Article 5 condemns torture. In connection with this, there is evidence that Latin American military forces trained at Ft. Benning, Georgia, at the US Army School of the Americas have been responsible for countless deaths, rapes and

massacres in Latin America. Dominicans from around the United States, along with their friends and students from several Dominican schools, help to swell the crowd of over 25,000 people that demonstrates annually against the recently renamed “Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation” outside the gates of Fort Benning. Over two hundred people have served federal prison time for civil disobedience at these protests – including one Dominican Sister.

Articles 13 and 14 recognize the reality of migration and the need for asylum. As recently as this past August, Dominican Sisters from North America met with Dominicans from Latin America in an effort to respond to the critical issue of migration. Many Dominican Sisters are directly involved in ministries among migrant peoples living in North America.

Article 28 calls for a just international order. Increasingly, multinational corporations have more influence in the international order than do many heads of state. In an effort to increase corporate accountability, many Dominican congregations with investments in corporations use their rights as shareholders to challenge corporate behavior. Dominican Sisters are among those who attend the annual meetings of corporations in order to present shareholder resolutions urging corporations to be socially and environmentally responsible. Issues include workers’ rights, rights of women and minorities, pollution, and many other matters affecting a variety of human rights.

This summary unfortunately only begins to point to the important contributions that Dominican Sisters in North America have made and continue to make to the creation of a more just world. Sisters are preaching justice through their apostolic works, both in traditional and contemporary forms. Beginning with those resilient jonquils in Kentucky, and continuing through the variety of wildflowers marked with the Dominican charism that blossomed across the North American continent, we thank God today for an extraordinary bouquet of works for justice. We conclude by seeking the intercession of the one whose feast we celebrate today –

the one who knew roses in December -- Our Lady of Guadalupe. May our Gospel preaching help to bring a harvest of justice to our desperate world.