



Monastery Bells

Life with the Cloistered Dominican Nuns

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MONASTERY OF THE INFANT JESUS

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The Garden of Dominic is broad, joyous and fragrant *St. Catherine*

According to Giuliana Cavallini there was a window in the room of Catherine of Siena, at her parents' home, which looked out into their family garden. had produced the many happy memories compare the Order Dominic founded to a can thrive is with an attentive gardener. In prioress is our gardener. But how does she



It could easily have been this image, which that inspired Catherine, in her Dialogue, to delightful garden. The only way a garden our monastic setting, you could say that the acquire this role and what are her duties?

Since its founding 800 years ago, the Dominican Order has exercised a democratic form of government. When a Dominican nun pronounces her final vows, she immediately acquires the right and the responsibility to vote in all major decisions of her community and to actively participate in the discussions that are part of the discernment process of the community Chapter. One of the most serious decisions the Sisters can make is to determine leadership in the election of the Prioress, who governs them for a period of three years according to the laws set down in the Constitutions of the Nuns. Since the Bishop of the diocese or his representative acts as president of the election, the date of the election and other arrangements are made as much as a year in advance. A few weeks before the election, the names of all those eligible to vote are sent to the Bishop as well as the names of Sisters who for various reasons may not be able to participate. The duty of voting is so serious that special permission is required to abstain.



We recently held our prioral election on July 16, 2016. The day began with a votive Mass of the Holy Spirit to invoke the Spirit's guidance. After lunch, the nuns gathered together in the community room to be sure the vocals (those who vote) and non-vocals were present. Then, at the sound of the bell the vocals filed into the Chapel where the Bishop's Vicar General, Very Rev. Anthony McLaughlin, JCD was waiting to begin the proceedings. (The non-vocals stay in the community room, praying and anticipating the bell that signals a prioress has been elected.) The Holy

Spirit was invoked once again and then the secretary called the roll and passed out a ballot slip to each vocal to vote for two tellers for the election. They, with Fr. McLaughlin would count the ballots and record the results. Once the tellers were in place at the table at the front of the Chapel, the secretary distributed another ballot slip to each vocal on which she would write the name of her choice for Prioress. Then each vocal went to the front of the Chapel to deposit her ballot in the urn reserved for this purpose and returned to her place. The entire process is carried out in silence, and there is no "campaigning" by anyone at any time. After all the vocals had voted, the results were tabulated and announced to the group. When the required majority was reached (this may take several ballots), the president announced the results and declared Sister Maria Guadalupe to be canonically (legally) elected. He then asked Sister if she would accept the election and she responded so that all could hear.



Sr. Maria Guadalupe and Fr. McLaughlin

In Dominican life, leadership is one of many services a Sister can be asked to assume and she must have a very serious reason to refuse. After the Sister has accepted the election, the minutes of the election process are drawn up and signed by the President, the two tellers and the Sister elected. When these are completed, the non-vocals are called to the chapel and the President announces the results to them. All of the Sisters then approach the new Prioress one by one to give her the Kiss of Peace as a sign of their acceptance of the election and their obedience to her.



When the election was completed, Fr. McLaughlin was invited for an informal meeting with the Sisters in the community room. Later in the day Sr. Maria Guadalupe met with the entire community and gave a brief talk expressing her gratitude for their confidence in electing her and offering encouragement to continue faithfully in the way of our Father Dominic.

The new Prioress usually takes time for a ten day retreat soon after the election. The days and weeks that follow are devoted to consulting with each Sister to determine where she might best serve the community in the coming three years. The Prioress then appoints a sub-prioress and novice directress and assigns the duties for the next three years. Then, as a good gardener, she will watch over the "plants", water them, nourish them, fertilize them, pluck out any weeds that appear in the soil, and do all she can to encourage growth and ensure good health.



We are a field where God by his mercy has thrown his seed, that is, love and affection with which he created us... He gave us the water of holy baptism so that this seed produces fruit and nourishes the plants. St. Catherine



The image of garden is used throughout the Bible. It can apply both to nature and sacred space. It is portrayed as a well-watered area set apart for the intense cultivation of plants. What a wonderful metaphor for a cloistered monastery?

The notion of garden as a sacred space applies particularly to our chapel. Catholics and non-Catholics alike are drawn there by the peace and love which emanate from the exposed Eucharist. Those who come are also welcomed with warmth by the Sister in charge of our guests. We try to provide the fertile ground where seeds can grow and bear fruit. These scattered seeds are planted through visits, as well as phone calls and letters. We pray to the Lord of the harvest. Sometimes we hear how the Lord has answered these prayers. In other cases, we entrust these intentions to God's tender mercy. Here are two examples of "transplants" that God pressed into monastery soil, which took root and spread through the land.

Fifteen-year-old Eduardo Nevares first arrived at our monastery when when he was a junior seminarian serving at our local parish with the LaSalette Missionaries. Sr. Mary Veronica, having worked as guest hostess as well as taking care of our chaplain, took him under her wing and encouraged him to serve at our community Mass. He persevered in his vocation, keeping in touch with us throughout the years and often using part of his summer vacation to visit here and to pray in our chapel. He was ordained in 1981 and served as parochial vicar at St. Patrick's here in Lufkin for seven years and later as pastor for an additional nine years. After twenty-five years as a LaSalette, Fr. Nevares was incardinated into the Tyler diocese. And in 2010 he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Phoenix, Arizona. His ordination as bishop was a special grace (and a surprise!) for us! St. Dominic wished that the monasteries of the Order would be like an oasis in the midst of a busy world, where one could truly find God in silence and where priests would find prayerful support in their ministry. We are sure that Bishop's flock, now in Arizona, will also be blessed by this faithful priest whom the Lord called to serve him with gladness!



We receive visits several times a year from groups who are interested in knowing more about our life. In the early 1980's one such group of students from Stephen F. Austin University in nearby Nacogdoches planned a day trip. Brian Pierce, thinking that "monastery" referred to some archaeological site, decided to join them. Instead he found a modern building filled with contemplative nuns! Brian was drawn to quiet prayer in our chapel and for two years took advantage of occasions to return. He soon became our friend and, having met our chaplain, Fr. Victor Brown, OP also became acquainted with the Dominican friars. It was not long before the seed (nourished by the nuns' hefty sandwiches!) took root and Brian entered the Order. Our Dominican motto is "to contemplate and give to others the fruits of contemplation." The deep silence that Fr. Brian enjoyed so much here later enabled him to minister to the poor in Latin and South America. He also served as Promoter General of the Dominican Nuns throughout the world. Now he is involved in itinerant preaching. We are grateful that God used our humble monastery to establish Fr. Brian in Dominic's garden, where he continues to thrive and flourish, spreading the seeds of God's Word.



The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. Matthew 13:31



A garden does not exist on its own, even when well tended. It is dependent on outside conditions which help it to grow. So, too, the monastery. Even as we share our spiritual fruits with joy, we also receive our sustenance with gratitude.

"The Polkers are coming; the Polkers are coming!" For forty years this cry has echoed through the Monastery several times each year alerting the community of the imminent arrival of several van-loads of food products of all kinds, from breakfast cereals and sweet rolls, to frozen vegetables, meat and fish, as well as fresh fruit and bakery goods.

This super-abundant outpouring of faithful support began with a mustard seed: a spontaneous visit to the Monastery. Mr. Keenan, already a regular benefactor from LaPorte, Texas, brought his friend Mr. Frank Polker to ask the prayers of the nuns for his family and business. Little did anyone realize at the time that this mustard seed would grow into a mighty shrub. For shortly after this first visit Mr. Polker, a baker, began to gift us regularly with fresh bread of all kinds. Later, his wife added her organizational skill to the effort by enlisting family and friends to contribute in whatever way they could to provide food for "her" nuns. After the death of their parents the Polkers' daughters joined in and continued the tradition. Now their children are taking their places. Today there are nearly one hundred benefactors who contribute regularly to this work of love! In July, we celebrated this forty-year-milestone with a Mass and a visit for those of the group who were able to attend. We lift our hearts in praise for them and all those who generously extend their kindness to us.

