

"THEIR MEMORY LIVES"

Homily given at the Memorial Mass for the
five sisters who perished in the fire at
St. John's Orphanage, Oct. 30, 1912...

1. Mother Mary of the Cross Rositer, born in Wexford, Ireland, died at age 47 years.
2. Mother Mary Francis Simpasteur, born in France, died at age 60 years.
3. Sister Peter Claver Slevin, born in Dublin Ireland, died at age 29 years.
4. Sister Leocadia Nolan, born in Dublin Ireland, died at age 28 years.
5. Sister Monica Montez, born in Mexico, died at age 50 years.
6. Sister Mary Kostka Farrell, born in County Kildare, Ireland, jumped from 3rd floor window the night of the fire, lived until Sept. 15, 1965, died at the Santa Rosa Hospital.

" Monsignor, fellow celebrants, Mother General, Mother Provincial, visiting priests, religious brothers and sisters, friends of Santa Rosa, Welcome!
The title of our eulogy is " Their Memory Lives"...

" Their Memory Lives"

What is the greatest proof of love?
"Greater love than this no one has
than to give one's life for one's friends."
Jesus did it and earned salvation for us all.
Martyrs we call the people who give their lives.
And if it is to save someone else's life,
we call them heroes or heroines.

The children at St. John's Orphanage are 92,
and they are all boys,
some babes in arms or a few years old,
others older or stronger,
sensing danger and able to follow a lead.
The guardians are nine, and they are nuns,
some young and strong, from Mexico, France, Ireland,
or older and firmer, like Mother Frances,
the first to enter the order of C.C.V.I.'s in Texas
Whoever they are, this is their home,
These are their children,
God's children, His image and His joy,
placed in their care as with parents.
For parents no burden is too heavy;
No child goes unloved or forsaken.
So it is with them.

When the fire comes roaring up the stairs,
licking in and out of the windows,
seeking young flesh to char and consume,
It is the nuns' time to act.
With quiet haste they shepherd their charges
down fire escapes,
or into the waiting nets spread to receive them,
The younger literally picked from the flames,
are dropped like cotton balls
for waiting hands to pluck as they bounce.

Are they all out? No, there are three missing,
babies of two or three years, helpless and horror-stricken.

Go back, Sisters, and find them!
We cannot face our maker
if we leave three behind to perish.
Go back; try again!

It is in vain, with walls crashing in,
Flames everywhere reaching for them.
No life can survive such a holocaust!
So jump, Sisters, into the net yourselves.

Sister Monica and Sister Kostka jump;
They can no longer see for the smoke, but they jump.

They miss the net!
The ambulance takes them away.
Sister Monica's fall is fatal.
 She has given the last of her energy.
Sister Kostka has a broken back:
 She will keep up her offering--for the saved
 and the lost--for over fifty years in a hospital bed.

Mother Mary of the Cross, the superior,
 at the window clutching her crucifix in prayer,
 ah, so close to making it
 when the flames reach out and imprison her
 and Mother Frances standing by.
The charred remains of Sister Leocadia and Peter Claver
 near the fire escape.

And the boys? They could not leave the boys.
 Two burned bodies under the rubble
 and a third missing.

It is all over now:
 89 boys safe--3 dead
 3 nuns safe--five dead
 1 maimed for life.
Bishop Shaw and six caskets,
 The building gone, but 89 boys safe!

Ah, Sisters, we need you so much, but you are gone!
Why didn't you leave earlier and come down alive?

" We are Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.
These children had a right to live;
In charity we could not leave them."

Don't question us Jesus.

You understand.

The cross was no easier than this fire.

As the survivors know, life comes at a high price,
a gift to be treasured.
Death comes too soon
but the memory lives on of supreme love
proved by the gift of love given by these 5 sisters!

This brief synopsis is the reason that we are assembled here today.
We are located almost on the exact spot on which these 5 heroines made ⁱⁿ ~~these~~
last physical contribution to humanity.

I have already mentioned each sister by name. We refer you to this
portrait to my right. Focus, if you will, on these 5 religious and also on
their fellow confrere Sister Mary Kostka, seated in her wheelchair. All of
us who knew Sister Kostka, or knew of her, will always remember her as she
looked in her wheelchair. There are many of you who may still recall Sister
Kostka's singing voice.

There are several details about this historic event which we have been
privileged to unravel and that have been touched on by Sister Helena Finck in
her History of the Congregation back in 1925. " St. John's Orphanage, erected
on the southwest corner of the Santa Rosa grounds, was a substantial stone
building, its long shady galleries on every floor affording a pleasant appear-
ance as well as ample facilities for fresh air... Reverend Mother of the order
upon completion of St. John's Orphanage wrote: " We have at present over thirty
little boys and we hope that when their ^{number} increases our Lord will give us the
means to provide a home for ourselves." St. John's Orphanage was built in
1891 according to the ^{elevation} ~~statement~~ made by architect Alfred Giles.

There is no account available as to where the origin of this fire was. We know that Oct. 12th was on a Wednesday. Also that St. John's Orphanage got its name in honor of the 2nd Bishop of the San Antonio Diocese, Bishop John Neraz, who incidentally lived at St. John's until his death. For the Bishop was ill and needed to be near medical help.

The fire was terrible in its wrath...From a tiny blaze at 4:25 A.M. it had become a roaring, seething volcano, visible for miles. The firemen arrived at 4:40 A.M. For some reason the alarm was not turned in until 4:35 A.M. For a half hour the flames, it was feared, would stretch across the short intervening space and burn down the Santa Rosa Infirmary also.

It's not difficult to imagine the horror experienced by Sr. Edith when she discovered the fire. How many more young boys would surely have perished, were it not for the efforts of both Sr. Edith and Sr. Broghan, in getting all the boys to wake up and evacuate.

The name of Dr. C.W. Stevenson bears mentioning. He was an intern at Santa Rosa. Dr. Stevenson was one of the first to run towards the burning building. He aided in the bringing of the children and sisters to places of rescue, and in the general duty of restoring calm and quiet among the hospital patients and orphans.

The mayor of the city then, was Alderman Richter. As well as aiding in the care of the children, the mayor gave hurried orders to have market hall put into condition to receive the boys.

The dramatic rescue attempt by fire chief Mr. Wright is clearly described in Sister Helena's account of the fire. Sister also tells us that by half-past six the fire was sufficiently subdued to permit the work of rescue and

clean-up to begin. At 8:30 A.M., two bodies were found in the southwest room on the third floor, and were removed by the firemen. The bodies were believed to be those of Mother Mary of the Cross and Mother Mary Francis. Sr. Leocadia and Sr. Peter Claver were found next.

At 10:00 A.M. Reice Jones, son of Brackenridge Jones of St. Louis Mo., found the body of one of the boys on the third floor of the ruins. The little fellow was known only as " Baby Dutch ", age approximately two years. The second body was Frances O'Brian, two years of age. His brother Thomas O'Brian, ten years old, was saved. Their mother had died just two months previously at the Santa Rosa Infirmary. Charles Motlach, age three years, was ^{the} third victim.

Sister Monica was described being on fire by an eye witness who is still alive today here in San Antonio. The net into which Sister Monica jumped, was held by several men, among them was one Capt. Christian. Sister missed the net, suffering injuries from which she succumbed ten minutes later at the Santa Rosa Infirmary.

Among the injured were several of the boys who suffered ^{smoke} inhalation, and some burns. Sister Mary Kostka Farrell, age 29 years, was in charge, at that time, of the little boys. Sister Kostka broke her back after jumping from the third floor. Sister was a native of County Kildare, Ireland. Miss A. Detemple an employee of St. John's Orphanage jumped from a window, badly wrenching her back, but she survived. Miss Lucy Stanuch, an employee also, wrenched her back, and suffered internal injuries, but she survived. Miss Stanuch was a native of St. Hedwig, Texas.

The music of the funeral mass was strictly Gregorian and was rendered by a choir of sisters. After mass, the "Libera" was chanted. Bishop Shaw

attempted to recite an adequate eulogy, but his grief was too profound.

The Houston Post ran an account of the story, and for several days there were editorials written. This description was the one quoted by Sr. Helena in her book. "The centuries are brilliant with the devotion of these women who have renounced the world to battle with distress, misfortune, and sorrow. Not one of these nuns was a native of the United States, four were from Ireland, one from France and one from Mexico, but all attained unto that sublimity of womanly faith and devotion which attests humanity's kinship with God." I feel that the foresight of a much earlier noblewoman, namely Queen Isabella the Catholic should be cited. In 1504 she made a codicil to her will. In this, was included the passage "Whereas, when the islands and mainland of the Ocean Sea were conceded to us by the Holy Apostolic See, our principal intention... was to produce, induce, and convert their peoples, to our Holy Catholic Faith and to send to the said islands and mainland, bishops, religious, clerics and other learned and God-fearing persons, to instruct them." These 5 heroines were the epitome of this royal mandate of so many years ago. In attempting to define the true meaning of a religious vocation, we could not easily draw many analogies. So in my contemplation at one of our ancient missions with its monastic ambience, it occurred to me that a true religious vocation today is getting almost as rare as the wall fresco which I was making a study of. There, religious messages applied unto these holy walls, have remained here for so many years.

Likewise a person with a true religious vocation today has to have stick-to-it-tiveness, a self-sacrificing nature, for the benefit of others. An understanding of human nature in all of its frailties and yet keeping an

unbiased, nonjudgemental disposition to all their fellow men. Because just like the rare, and beautiful art technique of frescoing on walls of stone, which incidentally is the most difficult of all arts to perform and to produce a good product, so it is with the life of a religious. True fresco is the noblest art form. In addition, a comparison can be made in that in true fresco there are no concessions to the painter; it offers no refuge to mediocrity. It is, in short, thoroughly unaccommodating. That is why a large segment of the laity are all too quick to express shock and disbelief at what may otherwise be a harmless act, except when this act is performed by one of our religious. You cannot simply say, "I am only human," because many of the laity see you as more than the average person, because we see the commitment to duty, which your life still requires. For this and other reasons my sisters, brothers, religious and priests, you have our deep, profound and sincere praise. The Christians of today still need you; our homeless orphans still need you; our senior citizens still need you, our brothers who are imprisoned still need you because you are the ones with so much to offer. Do not be downcast; hold yourselves up high because we lay persons still hold you in the highest esteem. Thank you for your untiring and continued devotion to duty.

In closing, please review if you will the proclamation given by the Knights of Columbus Council No. 786, to Mother Alphonse to honor the 5 sisters who lost their lives in this fire. Thank you, Monsignor.

Narrated by Homilist
Richard C. Garay, L.V.N.
Sat., Oct. 30, 1982 at
Santa Rosa's Chapel.

St. Peter's - St. Joseph's
Wane

To the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, whose members sacrificed their lives to save those of orphan children, and to the relatives of the deceased Sisters.

Whereas, humanity was inexpressibly shocked by the awful deaths of Mother Mary of the Cross, Mother St. Francis, Sister M. Peter Claver, Sister Mary Monica and Sister Mary Leocadia, on the morning of October 30th 1912, while endeavoring to save the lives of the orphans during the fire which destroyed St. John's Orphan Asylum, of San Antonio, Texas.

Resolved, that we express to the surviving members of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and to the relatives of the deceased sisters our most sincere sympathy in their sad bereavement.

Resolved, that while thus extending our sympathy we deem it but just to say that the sisters, by their devoted lives and their tragic deaths, have given the highest testimony of the faith in which they lived and died, and the strongest proof that religion inspires the sublimest courage and the noblest heroism.

Resolved that the supreme sacrifice of the sisters in behalf of the children entrusted to their care points in a most touching manner to the highest place ever held by the Catholic Sisterhood on the greatest roll of honor, and it is at the same time the most eloquent reply to him who would introduce those whose only transgression has been an unfaltering devotion to duty.

Other hope had they none, nor wish in life, but to follow meekly, with reverent steps, the sacred feet of their Savior.

Adopted by the San Antonio Council No. 786, of the Knights of Columbus at San Antonio, Texas December 24th 1912.