



Remarks given
at the Bicentennial Celebration
of the Kentucky
Dominican Sisters
Fr. Kevin A. McGrath,
O.P.
May 1, 2022

The place was Washington County, near Springfield, Kentucky.

The date was February 28, 1822.

I like to think it was a frosty day, but then this is Kentucky.
It might have been 80 degrees!

That Sunday, Fr. Samuel Thomas Wilson of the Order of Preachers, got up to preach at St. Rose Church.

Fr. Wilson was one of the four founding friars of St. Rose, the first Dominican foundation in the United States. And he had been pastor since 1808.

When Fr. Wilson got up to preach that Sunday, he probably did not know that he was about to deliver what Sr. Paschala Noonan, in her history of the Kentucky Dominican Sisters,¹ would call the ‘most fruitful sermon of his life.’

Fr. Wilson made an appeal to the women of the congregation of St. Rose. The community had a great need. Young people were in need of education.

When Catholic pioneers first began settling along Cartwright Creek, education was not a priority.

Survival was.

But now, thirty some harvests on, Washington County was more settled, more stable.

Now, the future *depended* on education.

And Fr. Wilson appealed to the women of his parish to become members of the Dominican Order and undertake the mission of educating the young people of the Cartwright Creek Catholic community.

We have no record of what kind of response Fr. Wilson was expecting. But the response he got was nothing short of extraordinary.

Nine women ...Nine women presented themselves in response to Fr. Wilson's preaching.

Now as a fellow pastor with Fr. Wilson,... in fact, I am his 54th successor as pastor of St. Rose ... as a fellow pastor, I can testify that it is remarkable to get nine people to volunteer for *anything* on the first ask!

But to get nine women from a single parish ... to voluntarily commit their lives to Jesus Christ through vows of poverty, chastity and obedience,... and out of love for Him, to give themselves totally to the work of education ...*that* borders on the miraculous!

Whatever response Fr. Wilson expected from his preaching, he had to know that the Holy Spirit was working very powerfully that Sunday morning at S. Rose.

That following Easter Sunday, four of those women received the Dominican habit and began their formation in the Order of Preachers.

We should hear their names: Mariah Sansbury, Judith McMan, Mary Carrico, and Severly Tarleton, who became Sisters Angela, Magdalene, Margaret, and Columba, respectively. The first Dominican sisters in the United States. Three more of the original nine would receive the habit shortly thereafter.

While this beginning was surprising, Fr. Wilson's plan should not have been.

In fact, even before St. Dominic de Guzman founded the friars of the Order of Preachers, he founded a monastery of sisters. St. Dominic knew instinctively that the work of his own brethren would be immeasurably strengthened by the work of the sisters. And soon, monasteries of Dominican nuns formed a network of material and spiritual help throughout Europe for the preaching mission of the friars.

Fr. Wilson clearly understood this principle of our Holy Father Dominic. And so began that Easter day a collaboration of Dominican friars and Dominican sisters in the United States that has continued for two hundred years to this very day.

When Fr. Edward Dominic Fenwick went to Ohio, he asked for sisters to help him. And they did. When the friars went to Memphis, Tennessee, sisters went too. When Fr. Richard Pius

Miles became Bishop of Nashville, he asked for Kentucky Dominican sisters to join him there. Where the Dominican friars were, the Dominican sisters were there as well.

And the mission of those sisters soon expanded beyond education. Dominican sisters cared for victims of cholera and yellow fever epidemics in Kentucky and Tennessee. They cared for the orphans from these same epidemics. They nursed dying and wounded soldiers during the Civil War.

And these Dominican Sisters would soon outpace the Dominican friars in the extent of their missionary work. Before long, they were in Illinois, Massachusetts, Iowa, Nebraska, West Virginia, Indiana, New York, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere.

Seeing the list of missions of the Kentucky Dominicans in Sr. Paschala's excellent history reminded me of a song by Johnny Cash. We could even edit it a bit to fit the circumstances:

*I've been to Springfield, Louisville, Memphis, Lebanon,
Watertown, Charlestown, Brooklyn, and Lincoln,
I've been everywhere, man, I've been everywhere.*

The sisters founded new congregations wherever they went, which began their own stories. Some of those sisters and stories are now united again as the Sisters of Peace.

But as far afield as they may have gone, the Sisters never forgot their roots here in the Kentucky Holy Land. Teaching in the public schools of Washington County; founding Catholic schools at St. Dominic's, St. Rose and Holy Trinity; teaching African American children at Holy Rosary, when this was still seen as something subversive. Founding St. Catharine Academy and St. Catharine's College which educated thousands in our community. Founding a hospital in Lebanon, which still serves our sick.

Think of the hundreds of thousands of youth throughout the country educated in the elementary schools, high schools, and colleges at which just these Dominican sisters served. Think of the thousands cared for at the hospitals and nursing homes they served. More recently, as the Dominican sisters entered into more diverse ministries, think of the many poor and marginalized people, immigrants and refugees who have been aided by the Sisters' labors, and the witness they have given toward our duty to care for our earthly home. There's hardly a person here, I dare say, whose life has not been touched in some way by the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine. We owe a great debt of gratitude to them – not just us, but the entire Church.

So, 200 years ago, as Fr. Samuel Wilson looked out at those nine women standing up in St. Rose Church ... did Fr. Wilson imagine all that would follow?

Did he have an inkling of what these sisters would become and accomplish? Probably not. But perhaps ... perhaps ... He already knew what God could do when someone responded generously to the Holy Spirit's call.

In a few short years, he and three other Dominican friars had established a church, a college, and a missionary ministry throughout the Kentucky and Ohio frontiers.

If Fr. Wilson could see all that these women have built over 200 years, he would be amazed, but not surprised.

As we should be ... amazed, but not surprised ... amazed at all that God has done with and through these Dominican Sisters; but not surprised, because it has also been the work of the Spirit.

St. Catherine of Siena, the patroness of this motherhouse, said it succinctly:

“Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”

Praise God that for 200 years, these sisters have sought to be who God meant them to be!

¹ *Signadou: History of the Kentucky Dominican Sisters*, Sr. Paschala Noonan, O.P., (Brookville Books: Manhasset, New York), 1997.