

August 1966



By Bill

For

Sister

Ignatia:

*our everlasting gratitude*

SISTER MARY IGNATIA, one of the finest friends that we of AA shall ever know, went to her reward Friday morning, April first, nineteen hundred sixty-six. Next day, the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine opened their Mother House to visitors. More than one thousand of them signed the guest book in the first two hours. These were the first of many who during the two days following came to pay their respects to Sister.

On Monday at high noon the Cathedral at Cleveland could barely

seat its congregation. Friends in the city and from afar attended the service. The Sisters of Charity themselves were seen to be seated in a body, radiant in their faith. Together with families and friends, we of AA had come there in expression of our gratitude for the life and works of our well-loved Sister. It was not really a time for mourning, it was instead a time to thank God for His great goodness to us all.

In its affirmation of the faith, the Mass was of singular beauty; the

more so to many, since it was spoken in English. The eulogy, written and read by a close friend of Sister's, was a graphic and stirring portrayal of her character, and of her deeds. There was a most special emphasis upon the merits of AA, and upon the part co-founder Dr. Bob had played in Sister's great adventure among us. We were assured as seldom before that those who dwell in the fellowship of the Spirit need never be concerned with barriers, or with boundaries.

For those thousands of men, women and children whose lives had been directly touched and illumined by Sister, it would perhaps not be needful to write this account of her. Of Sister, and of the Grace she brought to all these, they already know better than anyone else. But to the many others who have never felt her presence and her love, it is hoped this narrative may be something for their special inspiration.

Born in 1889 of devout and liberty-loving parents, Sister entered into this world at Shanvilly, County Mayo, of the Emerald Isle. The famed poet Yeats, born nearby, once remarked that the strange beauty of County Mayo had been specially designed to raise up poets, artists, heroes and saints. We can little doubt that even when Ignatia was aged six, and her parents had emigrated from Ireland to Cleveland, she was already beginning to manifest many a sterling virtue.

Soon the child began to reveal unusual musical talents, both of piano and voice. A few years later she was seen giving lessons at the home of her parents. During 1914, she became possessed of a great desire to become a religious. In this year she joined the Community that many of us AAs know so well — the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. There she continued her musical education and her teaching.

But even then, as ever since, Sister was frail, exceeding frail. By 1933 the rigors of her music teaching had become too great. She had a really serious physical breakdown. Her doctor put to her this choice: "You will have to take it easy. You can either be a dead music teacher or a live Sister. Which is it going to be?"

With great good cheer, so her Community says, Mary Ignatia accepted a much quieter and less distinguished assignment. She became the registrar at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio — an institution administered by her Order. At the time it was wondered if she could manage even this much. That she would live to the age of seventy-seven was not believable; that she was destined to minister to 15,000 alcoholics and their families in the years to come was known only to God.

For a considerable time Sister serenely carried on at the admissions desk in St. Thomas. It was not then certain she had ever heard of AA.

Though Group One at Akron, and Group Two in New York had been in slow and fitful growth since 1935, neither had come to public notice.

### AA's sudden growth

However in 1939 the scene changed abruptly. In the spring of that year the AA book was first printed, and *Liberty* magazine came up with an article about our society in the early fall. This was quickly followed by a whole series of remarkable pieces which were carried by *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* on its editorial page. The newspaper and the mere two dozen AAs then in town were swamped by frantic pleas for help. Despite this rather chaotic situation, the Cleveland membership burgeoned into several hundreds in a few months.

Nevertheless the implications of this AA population explosion were in some ways disturbing, especially the lack of proper hospital facilities. Though the Cleveland hospitals had rallied gallantly to this one emergency, their interest naturally waned when bills often went unpaid, and when ex-drunks trooped through the corridors to do what they called "Twelfth Step" work on sometimes noisy victims just arrived. Even the City Hospital at Akron, where Dr. Bob had attended numerous cases, was showing signs of weariness.

In New York we had temporarily got off to a better start. There we had dear old Dr. Silkworth and,

after awhile, his wonderful AA nurse "Teddy." This pair were to "process" some 12,000 New York area drunks in the years ahead, and so they became, as it were, the "opposite numbers" to the partnership of co-founder Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia at Akron.

Much concerned that, hospital-wise, his area might be caught quite unprepared to cope with a great new flood of publicity about AA, Dr. Bob in 1940 decided to visit St. Thomas and explain the great need for a hospital connection that could prove permanently effective. Since St. Thomas was a church institution, he thought the people there might vision a fine opportunity for service where the others had not. And how right he was!

### Sister Ignatia learns of AA

But Bob knew no one in authority at the hospital. So he simply betook himself to "Admissions" and told the diminutive nun in charge the story of AA, including that of his own recovery. As this tale unfolded, the little sister glowed. Her compassion was deeply touched and perhaps her amazing intuition had already begun to say, "This is it." Of course Sister would try to help, but what could one small nun do? After all, there *were* certain attitudes and regulations. Alcoholism had not been reckoned as an illness; it was just a dire form of gluttony!

Dr. Bob then told Sister about

an alcoholic who then was in a most serious condition. A bed would simply have to be found for him. Said Mary Ignatia, "I'm sure your friend must be very sick. You know, Doctor, this sounds to me like a terrible case of indigestion." Trying to keep a straight face, Dr. Bob replied, "How right you are — his indigestion *is* most terrible." Twinkling, Sister immediately said, "Why don't you bring him in right away?"

The two benign conspirators were soon faced with yet another dilemma. The victim proved to be distressingly intoxicated. It would soon be clear to all and sundry that his "indigestion" was quite incidental. Obviously a ward wouldn't do. There would have to be a private room. But all the single ones were filled. What on earth could they do? Sister pursed her lips, and then broke into a broad smile. Forthwith he declared, "I'll have a bed moved into our flower room. In there he can't disturb anyone." This was hurriedly done, and the "indigestion" sufferer was already on his way to sobriety and health.

Of course the conspirators were conscience-stricken by their subterfuge of the flower room. And anyhow, the "indigestion" pretense simply couldn't last. Somebody in authority would have to be told, and that somebody was the hospital's Superior. With great trepidation Sister and Dr. Bob waited upon this good lady, and explained themselves. To their immense delight

she went along, and a little later she boldly unfolded the new project before the St. Thomas trustees. To their everlasting credit they went along too — so much so that it was not a great while before Dr. Bob himself was invited to become a staff physician at St. Thomas, a bright example indeed of the ecumenical spirit.

Presently a whole ward was devoted to the rehabilitation of alcoholics, and Sister Ignatia was of course placed in immediate charge. Dr. Bob sponsored the new cases into the hospital and medically treated each, never sending a bill to any. The hospital fees were very moderate and Sister often insisted on taking in patients on a "pay later" basis, sometimes to the mild consternation of the trustees.

Together Ignatia and Dr. Bob indoctrinated all who cared to listen to the AA approach as portrayed by the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, lately come off the press. The ward was open to visiting AAs from surrounding groups who, morning to night, told their stories of drinking and of recovery. There were never any barriers of race or creed; neither was AA nor Church teaching pressed upon any.

### With infinite tenderness

Since nearly all her strenuous hours were spent there, Sister became a central figure on the ward. She would alternately listen and talk, with infinite tenderness and

*". . . caring . . . was a chief ingredient of her unique Grace."*

understanding. The alcoholic's family and friends received the very same treatment. It was this most compassionate caring that was a chief ingredient of her unique Grace; it magnetically drew everyone to her, even the most rough and obstinate. Yet she would not always stand still for arrant nonsense. When the occasion required, she could really put her foot down. Then to ease the hurt, she would turn on her delightful humor. Once, when a recalcitrant drunk boasted he'd never again be seen at the hospital, Sister shot back, "Well, let's hope *not*. But just in case you *do* show up, please remember that we already have your size of pajamas. They will be ready and waiting for you!"

As the fame of St. Thomas grew, alcoholics flocked in from distant places. After their hospitalization they often remained for a time in Akron to get more first-hand AA from Dr. Bob, and from Akron's Group Number One. On their return home, Sister would carry on an ever mounting correspondence with them.

We AAs are often heard to say that our Fellowship is founded upon resources that we have drawn from medicine, from religion and from our own experience of drinking and of recovery. Never before nor since those Akron early days have we

witnessed a more perfect synthesis of all these healing forces. Dr. Bob exemplified both medicine and AA; Ignatia and the Sisters of St. Augustine also practiced applied medicine, and their practice was supremely well animated by the wonderful spirit of their Community. A more perfect blending of Grace and talent cannot be imagined.

It should never be necessary to dwell, one by one, upon the virtues of these magnificent friends of AA's early time — Sister Ignatia and co-founder Dr. Bob. We need only recollect that "by their fruits we shall always know them."

### **Passing of Dr. Bob**

Standing before the Cleveland International Convention of 1950, Dr. Bob looked upon us of AA for the last time. His good wife Anne had passed on before, and his own rendezvous with the new life to come was not many months away.

Ten years had slipped by since the day when he and Sister had bedded down that first sufferer in the St. Thomas flower room. In this marvelous decade Sister and Dr. Bob had medically treated, and had spiritually infused, *five thousand alcoholics*. The greater part of these had found their freedom under God.

In thankful recollection of this great work, we of AA presented to the Sisters of Charity of St. August-

tine and to the Staff of the St. Thomas Hospital a bronze plaque, ever since to be seen in the ward where Sister and Dr. Bob had wrought their wonders. The plaque reads as follows:

IN GRATITUDE  
THE FRIENDS OF DR. BOB AND ANNE S.  
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATE THIS MEMORIAL  
TO THE SISTERS AND STAFF OF  
ST. THOMAS HOSPITAL  
AT AKRON, BIRTHPLACE OF ALCOHOLICS  
ANONYMOUS. ST. THOMAS HOSPITAL BECAME  
THE FIRST RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION EVER  
TO OPEN ITS DOORS TO OUR SOCIETY.  
MAY THE LOVING DEVOTION OF THOSE WHO  
LABORED HERE IN OUR PIONEERING TIME  
BE A BRIGHT AND WONDROUS EXAMPLE  
OF GOD'S GRACE EVERLASTINGLY SET  
BEFORE US ALL.

Visitors at St. Thomas today often wonder why this inscription says not a word about Sister Ignatia. Well, the fact was, she wouldn't allow her name to be used. She had flatly refused; it was one of those times when she had put her foot down! This was of course a glowing example of her innate and absolutely genuine humility. Sister truly believed that she deserved no particular notice; that such Grace as she might have could only be credited to God and to the community of her sisters.

This was indeed the ultimate spirit of anonymity. We who had then seen this quality in her were deeply affected, especially Dr. Bob and myself. Hers came to be the influence that persuaded us both

never to accept public honors of any sort. Sister's example taught that a mere observance of the *form* of AA anonymity should never become the slightest excuse for ignoring its *spiritual substance*.

Following Dr. Bob's death, there was great concern lest Sister might not be allowed to continue her work. As in other orders of the church, service assignments among the Sisters of Charity were rather frequently rotated. This was the ancient custom. However, nothing happened for a time. Assisted by surrounding AA groups, Sister continued to carry on at St. Thomas. Then suddenly in 1952, she was transferred to St. Vincent Charity Hospital at Cleveland, where, to the delight of us all, she was placed in charge of its alcoholic ward. At Akron a fine successor was named to succeed her; the work there would continue.

The ward at "Charity" occupied part of a dilapidated wing, and it was in great need of repair and rejuvenation. To those who knew and loved Sister, this opportunity proved a most stimulating challenge. The Charity trustees also agreed that something should be done. Substantial contributions flowed in. In their spare hours, AA carpenters, plumbers and electricians set about redoing the old wing — no charge for their services. The beautiful result of these labors of love is now known as Rosary Hall.

Again the miracles of recovery

from alcoholism commenced to multiply. During the following fourteen years, an astonishing 10,000 alcoholics passed through the portals of "Rosary Hall" there to fall under the spell of Mary Ignatia, and of AA. More than two-thirds of all these recovered from their dire malady, and again became citizens of the world. From dawn to dark Sister offered her unique Grace to that endless procession of stricken sufferers. Moreover, she still found time to minister widely to their families and this very fruitful part of her work became a prime inspiration to the Al-Anon Family Groups of the whole region.

Notwithstanding her wonderful workers within the hospital, and help from AAs without, this must have been a most exacting and exhausting vocation for the increasingly frail Sister. That she was providentially enabled to be with us for so many years is something for our great wonder. To hundreds of friends it became worth a day's journey to witness her supreme and constant demonstration.

Toward the close of her long stewardship there were brushes with death. Sometimes I came to Cleveland and was allowed to sit by her bedside. Then I saw her at her best. Her perfect faith, and her complete acceptance of whatever God might will was somehow implicit in all she said, be our conversation gay, or serious. Fear and uncertainty seemed entire strangers to her. On my leave-

taking, there was always that smiling radiance; always her prayerful hope that God might still allow her a bit more time at Rosary Hall. Then a few days later I would learn that she was back at her desk. This superb drama would be re-enacted time after time. She was quite unconscious that there was anything at all unusual about it.

Realizing there would come the day which would be her last, it seemed right that we of AA should privately present Sister with some tangible token that could, even a little, communicate to her the depth of our love. Remembering her insistence, in respect of the Akron plaque, that she would not really like any public attention, I simply sent word that I'd like to come to Cleveland for a visit, and casually added that should her health permit, we might take supper together in the company of a few of her stalwart AA friends and co-workers. Besides, it was her fiftieth year of service in her community.

On the appointed evening, we foregathered in one of the small dining rooms at Charity Hospital. Plainly delighted, Sister arrived. She was barely able to walk. Being old-timers all, the dinner hour was spent in telling tales of other days. For her part, Sister regaled us with stories of St. Thomas and with cherished recollections of Anne and co-founder Dr. Bob. It was unforgettable.

Before Sister became too tired

we addressed ourselves to our main project. From New York, I had brought an illuminated scroll. Its wording was in the form of a letter addressed by me to Sister, and it was written on behalf of our AA Fellowship worldwide. I stood up, read the scroll aloud, and then held the parchment for her to see. She was taken by complete surprise and could scarcely speak for a time. In a low voice she finally said, "Oh, but this is too much — this is too good for me."

Our richest reward of the evening was of course Ignatia's delight; a joy unbounded the moment we assured her that our gift need not be

publicized; that if she wished to stow it away in her trunk we would quite understand.

It then seemed that this most memorable and moving evening was over. But there was to be another inspiring experience. Making light of her great fatigue, Sister insisted that we all go up to Rosary Hall, there to make a late round of the AA ward. This we did, wondering if any of us would ever again see her at work in the divine vocation to which she had given her all. For each of us this was the end of an epoch; I could think only of her poignant and oft-repeated saying, "Eternity is now."

The scroll given to Sister may now be seen at Rosary Hall. This is the inscription:

*IN GRATITUDE  
FOR SISTER MARY IGNATIA  
ON THE OCCASION OF HER GOLDEN  
JUBILEE*

*Dear Sister,*

*We of Alcoholics Anonymous look upon you as the finest friend and the greatest spirit we may ever know.*

*We remember your tender ministrations to us in the days when AA was very young. Your partnership with Dr. Bob in that early time has created for us a spiritual heritage of incomparable worth.*

*In all the years since, we have watched you at the bedside of thousands. So watching, we have perceived ourselves to be the beneficiaries of that wondrous light which God has always sent through you to illumine our darkness. You have tirelessly tended our wounds; you have nourished us with your unique understanding and your matchless love. No greater gifts of Grace than these shall we ever have.*

*Speaking for AA members throughout the world, I say: "May God abundantly reward you according to your blessed works—now and forever."*

March 25, 1964

*In devotion,  
Bill W.*