

EULOGY OF SISTER M. IGNATIA

By

Reverend Thomas L. Coonan

April 5, 1966

"Greater love than this no man hath than that he lay down his life for his friend." (John 15:13)

As we gather here today in this beautiful cathedral to celebrate the last, sad obsequies of the dedicated and heroic little lady, who was at once the apostle of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Angel of Deliverance to tens of thousands of men and women afflicted with the grim, rampant and fatal malady of alcoholism, it is fitting that we begin by contrasting the Christian with the pagan concept of death. To the pagan mind, death was the end of life. "Oh Pale Death," wrote the Roman poet Horace, "which knocks impartially at the palaces of the rich and the cabins of the poor." To the Christian mind, however, death is the beginning of a new and more perfect life. As stated by the early Christian poet, Fortunatus, "There is no death. What seems so is transition. This place of mortal breath is but the pathway to the land Elysium, whose portals we call death."

"I am the Resurrection and the Life," said the Lord. He who believes in Me, although he be dead shall live, and everyone who believes in Me shall not perish but shall possess life everlasting."

In attempting to eulogize the life of Sister Ignatia, we are reminded of the opening lines of Marc Antony's oration, "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." She sought neither honor nor glory in life, but honor and glory sought her. In the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles, "The life she lives, she lived for men. The death she died, she died to God."

Sister Ignatia was born in Ireland in 1889. Her birthplace, Shavilly in County Mayo, is a wild moorland interspersed with silver lakes, blue mountains, golden gorse and purple heather, where in summertime one hears the skylarks warble and the ceruleus cry. Her people were hospitable Irishmen and women imbued with deep faith, Christ-like charity, and a love of liberty. The great poet, Yeats, who was raised close by, considered the setting one especially fitted to produce poet, artists, saints and heroes. And in her frail, delicate and starchy composure, Sister Ignatia possessed, in an eminently practical way, all of these priceless qualities.

Rich in the wisdom of the Emerald Isle, she had the soul of a poet and the genius of an artist. And whatever she touched turned to gold. The more, in her supreme modesty, she tried to conceal her holiness, the more it became known to all men. As long as "memory hold a seat in this distracted globe," history will point to her as one of the earth's sublime heroines.

At the age of six, Sister Ignatia emigrated to America with her parents and brother Pat, and took up

residence here in Cleveland. She specialized in music in various American schools, and before entering the convent, instructed pupils in her parent's home. In September, 1914 she received the habit of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Augustine, and served the community as a teacher of music until she was incapacitated by a physical break-down in 1933. She cheerfully accepted the doctor's directive, "better a live Sister than a dead musician"---and in 1934 she was appointed to Saint Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio as registrar.

The following years, 1935, Divine Providence drew together two alcoholic laymen, Bill, a Wall Street broker and Doctor Bob, a surgeon attached to the staff of Saint Thomas Hospital in Doctor Bob's home town, Akron, Ohio. Had these two men been great religious reformers, they might have failed to attract a following, but although both were men of genius, they were neither reformers nor exhibitionists. They were rather, two humble, open-minded American gentlemen, conscious only of their failure in their respective professions because of alcoholic over indulgence. They were far too wise and honest to think that they had discovered a cure for alcoholism, a disease which continues to baffle the collective resources of medical science, psychiatry and denominational religion. On the contrary, they prefaced the findings of their experience with the humble acknowledgment, "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol."

Neither did they claim to have discovered a unique way of release and recovery from alcoholism. They made no claim at all other than the modest profession that through the grace of God, "as they understood Him," they had devised a set of principles based on the spiritual and moral nature of man, a program of spiritual kindergarten, which if practiced by the alcoholic on a day-to-day basis, would restore him to a serene and permanent sobriety.

In the nature of things, there had to be a catalytic agent to get their program into action, and Doctor Bob approached a third person of genius, Sister Ignatia, the registrar of Saint Thomas Hospital. He told her that he and a friend had been working on a new method of rehabilitating alcoholics, and he requested her, as registrar, to provide a private hospital room for an alcoholic patient.

Apart from the fact that no such room was available, and that alcoholics, as such, were refused admittance to any place other than jails and workhouses at that time, Sister Ignatia understood of the import of Doctor Bob's request. Her heart welled with pity for the poor alcoholic children of this world. So, in wisdom and charity, she quietly prepared a bed in the hospital flower room and admitted Doctor Bob's alcoholic patient. Her Mother Superior approved of her improvisation, and assigned her to the task of adopting a permanent hospital plan for alcoholics in cooperation with the Co-Founds of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill and Doctor Bob. Saint Thomas Hospital in Akron, thus became the first institution in the world to cater to alcoholic patients, as such.

Meanwhile, in order to gain insight into the alcoholic mind and heart, Sister Ignatia chose to identify herself with the alcoholic, and continued to direct the work of alcoholic rehabilitation as an undertaking of the Sister of Charity until her final incapacitation a few months before her death last Friday morning.

Despite the fact that progress was initially slow, that complaints were heard on every side, that people were skeptical and that many professed to regard AA as an ephemeral curiosity, if not a racket, Sister Ignatia, with the aid and guidance of the AA founders, surmounted every obstacle.

She dedicated the last twenty-eight golden years of her religious life as one incessant heroic sacrifice to the rehabilitation of alcoholics, irrespective of race, color, creed or condition. After the manner of Christ's injunction in the Sermon on the Mount, "What you have freely received, freely give," she unreservedly put her piety, her wisdom, her experience, her mercy, her compassion, her purity, her love and her very life at the abandoned or degraded. "Greater love than this no man hath that he lay down his life for his friend."

Throughout it all, her marvelous sense of humor never failed her. A few examples will suffice. One of the rehabilitated who had prayed the Rosary with her daily for many years, approached her one day with the remark, "Sister, this is the tenth anniversary of my restoration to sobriety." "That's wonderful, Marty," she replied, "But don't forget that should you ever need our services again, we still have your size in pajamas."

Another, who had been what the AA's call a "slipper," returned to her disconsolate and in tears with the request: "Please pray for me, Sister." "I will indeed Jim," she replied, "but you also must do a little praying. There is nothing God likes to hear so much as a strange voice."

It was characteristic of Sister Ignatia's self-effacing thoughtfulness that when she opened a second alcoholic ward in Saint Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland in 1952, she had it dedicated as "Rosary Hall Solarium." It was intended as a memorial to Doctor Bob who had died in Akron in 1950, and the insignia on it read "R.H.S." which coincided with his initials, Robert Holbrook Smith.

Sister Ignatia's career as the angel of deliverance to alcoholics reads like a fabulous success story. In Rosary Hall alone she treated more than ten thousand alcoholic patients and of those, sixty-five percent were immediately restored to a happy and permanent sobriety. Of the remainder, although many struggled for a time, they ultimately ended their suffering by accepting the AA program. Her method was eminently practical. Her aim was to restore the alcoholic victim to a happy sobriety. In accordance with AA principles, in combination with the latest medical therapy, alcohol was slowly withdrawn from the patient. His mind was gradually defogged and his distorted thinking was then replaced by a new philosophy of life, which was inculcated through persuasive group therapy. The whole person was treated. The spiritual and moral character was reintegrated, and the rehabilitated alcoholic was restored to his family and society as a valuable member of the community.

In due time, he in turn began to sponsor other alcoholics, and in this manner, the beneficent therapy of Rosary Hall was diffused throughout the nation.

Today, Rosary Hall --Sister Ignatia's creation--administers to alcoholic patients from all over the United States and Canada. And since the AA fellowship has become world-wide, Rosary Hall also engages in an extensive correspondence, answering appeals for advice from AA groups in the British Isles, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. In addition, Rosary Hall functions as a training center and as a hospitable clearing house for rehabilitated alcoholics and their friends, not only from Cleveland but from all over America and the free world.

Cleveland has, therefore, good reason to mourn the passing of Sister Ignatia, the abiding genius of Rosary Hall, the institution which has lent the city such a unique civic, social and humanitarian distinction. This was precisely the point emphasized by President Kennedy in his letter of March 1, 1961 congratulating Sister Ignatia on the success of Rosary Hall in restoring an increasingly large

numbers of citizens to useful citizenship, and in adding moral and spiritual strength to the American community and nation.

And yet, as Sister Ignatia's fame became known throughout the land, as men spoke of her charismatic power of rehabilitating helpfulness to alcoholics, and as her name became a legend from coast to coast, she expressed her distress lest anyone might think that she had any other aspiration than to be a humble, dedicated, anonymous Sister of Charity. Of her greatness and her fame, she was utterly unconscious. To her, the AA movement was inspired and God-given, a mystery in the sense that it was the medium through which God ordinarily imparts the gift of sobriety to alcoholics. As for herself, she was but a poor, weak and imperfect instrument in the hands of Almighty God. She love to cite the dive paradox posed by the Apostle to the Gentiles.

"For the foolish things of the world, has God chosen to put to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world has God chosen to confound the strong, and the base things of the world and the despised has God chosen, and the things that are not, to bring to naught the things that are, lest any flesh should glory in His sight." (Corth. 1, 27-30)

In rehabilitating alcoholics who had lapsed from their religion, Sister Ignatia was always careful to urge them to return to their church. She was as ecumenical in spirit as Pope John, whom she revered, and to whom she bore a significant comparison. Like him, she thoroughly understood the human equation, and like him also, she thought of the Catholic Church in terms of its Christian and evangelical moorings. To an alcoholic who had expressed concern about Pope John's approach to our separated brethren, she replied: "The importance of our religion lies in making it heavenly to all around us. In its essentials, Catholicism is not as far apart as you suppose, from the beliefs of our separated brethren. Under the guidance of good Pope John, love can surmount every obstacle."

It is a small mead of praise to Sister Ignatia to say that in her sublime vocation she lent tone, dignity and distinction to the saving AA fellowship, to her community, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Augustine, to the city of Cleveland and to the American nation.

To comprehend her life-giving sanctity, it is helpful to recall Milton's outpouring of the spirit, when as a blind man he returned to Christ Church, Cambridge, the scene of his youthful inspiration. "But let my sure feet never fail to walk the studious cloister pale, and love the high embowered roof, with antic pillars massy proof, and storied windows richly bright, casting a dim religious light. There let the pealing organ blow, to the full voiced choir below, in service high and anthems clear, as may with sweetness through mine ear, dissolve me into ecstacies and bring all heaven before mine eyes."

Sister Ignatia's lofty moral stature had as many beautiful facets as Milton's heavenly vision in the venerable edifice of Christ Church, Cambridge. Her life was an incessant labor of love for afflicted humanity. Her success was truly miraculous. If in life, this charming, radiant little lady was such a powerful force for good, may not the tens of thousands to whom she brought salvation and who are so liberally represented here today, rest assured that in death she will remain the inspiration, the burning and the shining light, and the sacred symbol of the cause of Alcoholics Anonymous. May we not be sure in our faith, hope and love that, like the woman of the Apocalypse clothed in the sun with the moon at her feet, God has already raised up His good and faithful servant, Sister Ignatia, above the highest hills to a pinnacle of immortal glory.