

Sister Mary Basil, SSND: Stand-in for St. Joseph

Mary Hester Valentine, SSND

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Back of the glory of Paris' Notre Dame cathedral stretches a long line of unknown architects, stone masons, carpenters, woodcarvers, sculptors, and glaziers, the endless procession of anonymous artists and craftsmen to whom the cathedral owes existence. The genius who coordinated this army of medieval workmen is an unknown as the names of the men whose gifts he directed, but his character stands revealed in his achievement.

Similar though different is Notre Dame of the Lake. It too tells a story of dedication and sacrifice, of the work and talent of thousands, but the energetic figure at the center of this twentieth-century achievement is not nameless. Sister Mary Basil, treasurer of the Milwaukee province, has coordinated the dreams of reverend Mothers Mary Andrina and Hilaria and their councils with the blue-prints of architects Brust and Brust and their three co-working contractors. From August, 1954, when the Order was advised to take out an option on the old Kiekhaefer farm on Lake Michigan, until the last unauctioned chair from the old motherhouse found a corner at Mequon, the financial details of the vast undertaking were her responsibility, and she handled them with a calm poise that a Wall Street mogul might envy.

Elected assistant to Mother Mary Fidelis in 1947, Sister Mary Basil brought to her new office a knowledge of banking gained before her entrance into the Order, a sound business sense, experience in administration, and deep faith in God. "When we bought the farm, a new motherhouse was in no one's mind, at least not in the foreseeable future," says Sister Mary Basil. "We were thinking then chiefly in terms of pork and beef."

But Divine Providence and Milwaukee's building inspector changed all that. The cost of the required improvements on the century-old building would have been hopelessly high. The proposal of a fund-raising campaign, at first discouraged by sympathetic Archbishop Albert G. Meyer who feared it would be a failure, was suddenly an urgent necessity when on December 17, 1956 the building inspector informed us that we were committing a serious legal offense by non-conformity to the code. "I almost spent that Christmas in jail," Sister comments wryly, "and while sympathy for my plight might have been good publicity for the cause, I'm grateful I have no police record."

With Archbishop Meyer's full support the crisis was met by an inevitable decision. The Community Counseling Service was engaged, to direct the three-month fund raising campaign in January, 1957. On June 7 of that year, ground was broken for the new motherhouse and the two-year building project was under way.

According to Sister Mary Basil, she was appointed coordinator because there had to be some one person with whom architects, contractors, plumbers, electricians, and

engineers could confer. What she does not say is that she was the obvious person. Hers was the delicate task of safeguarding the austere refinement of religious poverty without jeopardizing the architects' professional integrity. Today's needs had to be satisfied in buildings constructed for tomorrow. Sister had consultations with department heads to discover their needs, conferences with architects to make those needs reality, long talks with lawyers and workmen. She studied stone and steel, door knobs and light fixtures, and became an authority on the building codes of Mequon and Wisconsin.

There were mistakes – such as the toll telephone outside the Sisters' refectory for the use of dimeless nuns; a door bell at only one of the multiple entrances; a roomful of individual baggage racks for community trunks. But mistakes were corrected as soon as Sister Mary Basil discovered them and could get to the nearest phone to report the slip.

Notre Dame of the Lake is no one person's achievement, but, as one who worked closely with her during the months of construction remarked, "If it were not for Sister Mary Basil the motherhouse would never be the splendid thing it is."

Sister Mary Basil says simply, "It is St. Joseph's building; he worked the miracle!"

And now that the motherhouse community has moved to Mequon, what will this capable nun with the quiet brown eyes do? The blueprints say her work is not finished: the auditorium-gym building is still to be erected. And she continues as treasurer of the SSND Milwaukee province with its \$3,500,000 debt which she and St. Joseph will liquidate. These are full-time jobs.