

Did you know . . .

Blessed Among Us: Sr. Mary Ignatia Gavin

One of the most influential pioneers in the development of Alcoholics Anonymous in late 1930 to early 1940 was Sr. Mary Ignatia Gavin, a Catholic nun of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. She is often referred to as the “Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Sr. Ignatia was born Della Gavin on Jan. 1, 1889 in Ireland. She was seven when her parents came to America and settled in northern Ohio. Della became a musician and supported her family by teaching piano lessons. She entered the convent in 1914 and became music director for her community. Sr. Mary Ignatia suffered a nervous breakdown and ulcers due to stress from overwork in the late 1920s and had to stop her music involvement. She took an assignment as hospital administrator of St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, OH. There she met Dr. Robert, one of the co-founders of AA with Bill W. She & Dr. Bob developed the first hospital treatment plan for those suffering with alcoholism based on the principles of AA: total abstinence from alcohol & drugs, dependence on God, commitment to the 12 Steps and willingness to help other alcoholics.

During these early years, alcoholism was regarded as a moral weakness rather than a disease but Sr. Ignatia treated her patients with compassion and common sense. She brought them hope and with “tough love” she helped them realize the realities of their addiction. She helped put them in touch with God, telling them to “bend your knees rather than your elbows.”

When Dr. Bob died in 1950, Sr. Ignatia stayed at St. Thomas until 1952 when she was transferred to St. Vincent Charity Hospital at Cleveland and placed in charge of the alcoholic ward which was in much need of repair. She, with the help of AA volunteers, transformed the ward and named it Rosary Hall Solarium.

Sr. Ignatia provided each patient, when they left care, with a Sacred Heart badge, and they had to promise to her that they would return the badge before they drank again.

It is estimated that before her retirement in `1965, Sr. Ignatia assisted in the treatment of 10,000 alcoholics. The number who benefited from AA is incalculable.

Sr. Ignatia died on April 1, 1966 in Richfield, OH. There were reportedly 3,000 people present at her funeral, including AA’s co-founder, Bill W.

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