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Haven for your Heart

Petoskey's Sacramentine Sisters and Monastery

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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Sacramentine Monastery overlooking Crooked Lake in Conway

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Petoskey's Sacramentine Monastery

By Richard A. Wiles

The Northern Michigan Review announced in June of 1950 that a branch of a 300-year-old order of Catholic nuns, the Carmelite Order, would be establishing a monastery in Petoskey, Michigan. A house built in 1885 and then owned by Petoskey businessman Herman Meyer (Meyer Hardware) had been purchased for the Carmelite Order of Catholic nuns, however, they decided to locate in Iron Mountain in the Upper Peninsula of

Michigan, rather than in Petoskey. The news article mentioned that the 17-room house would be remodeled, and a wall would be built around the property.

The Meyer home was purchased in August of 1950, however, since the Carmelite nuns chose to locate in Iron Mountain, the house was not occupied until the following fall in 1951. The Petoskey Evening News on Sept. 21, 1951, ran a first-page headline, "Branch of Sacramentine Nuns to Be Established Here Soon."

They were to occupy the home at 918 Howard Street which was bought earlier for the nuns of the Carmelite Order. In October of 1951, three nuns arrived in the city from Yonkers, New York, and took up residence in the Fochtman house (604 Michigan Street) where the local St. Francis Catholic School nuns and teachers were housed. Eventually, the nuns and some of their counterparts from the monastery in New York would take up residence at 918 Howard St. It would be the second of three homes for the monastic nuns in the Petoskey area.



604 Michigan Street, former Eugene Fochtman home, was the first home of the Sacramentine Sisters in Petoskey.

The monastic order had been founded in 1659 in Marseille, France, by a Dominican priest named Father Le Quien. His new order was in response to the Protestant denial of the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist (Catholics firmly believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist). The new order's sole purpose was to have nuns devote their life to contemplative thought and adoration of the Holy Sacrament (blood and body of Christ). Over the 300 years of their existence, they have been called the Order of the Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament, the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, and the Sisters of the Holy Sacrament. At one time, eight monasteries of this order existed throughout the world, in France, England, Belgium and the United States.

Following the opening of the Marseille monastery in 1659, the order opened a second in Bollene, France, in 1725, and a third in Avignon, France, in 1807. In that same year, a fourth order



918 Howard Street

was established in Aix-en-Provence, France, followed by a fifth in Carpentas, France, in 1816. Then, in 1859, the order established its sixth in Bernay, France (Normandy). However, the group was expelled in July of 1903 and some of the nuns took up residence in Halle, Belgium, while others settled in Newport, England (Wales).

The English-based order moved to the United States in 1912, establishing a house first in Yonkers, New York, and later in Greenburgh, where, as of October 2019, four sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were still living. In 1950, at the request of Catholic Bishop Francis Hass of Grand Rapids, Michigan, seven sisters from the Yonkers monastery came to Petoskey to establish a new religious house.

On Oct. 11, 1951, the Petoskey Evening News reported "Mother Superior Mary Augustine and two others arrived here and four more are due to arrive Friday. Until such time as the home they purchased from Mr. and Mrs. Herman Meyer on top of Howard St. is ready, they will live with Sisters of St. Francis."

The sisters were to generate support money by gathering alms from laypeople, making altar brands such as candles and beads, ceremonial robes and paintings. Also, to help support the new Petoskey-based monastery, the nuns began to offer retreats for women. These experiences offered both laypeople and nuns an opportunity to meditate, pray, learn and be in fellowship with others. One woman was allowed to pursue her own personal



OFFICIAL GROUNDBREAKING took place yesterday afternoon at Conway for the new \$550,000 Sacramentine monastery and retreat house, attracting several priests and church members in the area. Shown above is Henry Galster, co-chairman of the fund drive from Petoskey, turning over a shovel of dirt. Others taking part in the ceremonies included Rev. Fr. Laurin Buzinski, pastor of St. Francis in the center who delivered the address on behalf of Bishop Allen J. Babcock of Grand Rapids and Mother Superior Mary Augustine of the Sacramentine Sister at the left is Assistant Mary of the Incarnation. Rev. Fr. John Sheehy, third from left, of Cheboygan, delivered the address of dedication. On the right are acolytes Fr. Kloniwicz, Elmira, and Fr. Decker of Indian River and cross bearer Fr. Max Ostrowski of

spiritual goals, or to meet with others along with spiritual directors. The Petoskey Sacramentine retreats were so popular, that, by July of 1952, two houses next to the monastery at 918 Howard Street were purchased and named the “Bethany Retreat House.”

In September of 1953, the name was changed to the “Blessed Sacrament Retreat House.” During that year the monastery provided 21 separate retreats in an effort to support itself. By the year 1958, the Sacramentines offered over 250 retreats and began to use the extra money to relocate to a larger building and space.

The Sacramentine Monastery relocation was helped along by a 10-acre

donation of land along U.S. 31 near the small hamlet of Conway (northeast of Petoskey). Work began in April of 1958 to build a new Monastery of Perpetual Adoration and sanctuary, and a Blessed Retreat House on the property. The estimated cost of the new structures was \$550,000 with only the shells of the new buildings to be completed at first, and the rest of the work completed as funds became available. The structures were situated to overlook Crooked Lake and were to contain a chapel and tower, private rooms for 30 sisters, 40 private rooms for the retreat attendees and private quarters for chaplains. A printing room, power plant room, infirmary, shipping and packing room, kitchen, dining room, work rooms for making bread and

altar beads, a library, parlors, lounge and meeting rooms were also to be included.

The major occupation of the Sacramentine nuns was perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament through daily contemplative thought and prayer. The lives of the nuns in the monastery consisted of observing five important pillars:

1. Personal and communal prayer
2. Silence and solitude
3. Communal life
4. Study and meditation
5. Manual work

According to the Sacramentine Sisters official website, sacramentinenuns.org, the title of the order in 2019 was



2798 U.S. 31 North, Conway



the Order of the Religious of the Blessed Sacrament and of Our Lady, and their mission, “We are called by God to love, praise and adore Him, not only for ourselves, but especially for those who, for whatever reason, cannot, will not, or simply do not do so. Our whole life is centered around Eucharistic worship. The daily celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, the adoration of Jesus in the Eucharist, the praying together of the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office), our private prayer and meditation, spiritual reading and study, are all the ways we strive daily to be united to our Eucharistic Lord.”

Anyone interested in joining the order “... should have a strong desire to give herself entirely to Jesus and His Holy Mother in a life of love and adoration within community. Entrance into the Monastery is preceded by a period of inquiry and a period of a live-in experience. We look for good health, both physical and emotional, (a medical report and psychological testing is required), and a good sense of humor. Also required is a high school education or its equivalent, with either further studies, work experience, or some form of committed endeavor. There is a postulancy of one year, noviceship for two years, followed by


temporary profession of the Vows for three years. After the three years of temporary profession, the candidate takes Final Perpetual Vows.

According to the 2001 History of the Order of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and of Our Lady by Barbara Hubeny, on the morning of July 1, 1960, at 6:30 a.m. a motorcade of cars carrying 18 Sacramentine Sisters and some friends left its monastery on Howard Street to take the Sisters to their new home in Conway. For most of them, it was the first time they had left the Howard Street compound since they first arrived. They left “... for the first Mass at their new foundation and the Blessed Sacramentine Retreat House.”

Meanwhile, in Halle, Belgium, the Sacramentine Monastery, which now houses only three remaining Sisters, has been ordered by the Vatican to close its doors. On April 17, 2019, the Brussels Times newspaper, printed an article titled “Three Nuns in Halle Defy Vatican over Convent Closure.”

The monastery’s three nuns, ages 30, 60, and 90, were adamant that they were staying put. One of the nuns was quoted, “Because we’re not attracting fresh blood, Rome wants us to close.

But we’re not silly girls. We’ll remain here and convert to beguines.”

(In the Catholic church, beguines are women who take up the cloistered life but without taking holy orders). In defiance to the Vatican, the nuns told reporters “Our doors will remain open for single women. Widows, divorcees, unmarried women, everyone is still welcome.” 

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Wiles holds a Bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master’s degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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