A Word of Hope

The Story of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, Province of St. Joseph

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A Word of Hope
Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Labaste, O.P.
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The Story of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter
of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic
Province of St. Joseph

Dennis J. Beldotti, OPL

Foreword by
Reverend Wayne Cavalier, OP
In memory of Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.,
a Dominican priest who had a vision for the rehabilitation of prisoners through God’s love.
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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are found within the text:

**Educational Degrees**

- B.S. Bachelor of Science
- D.D. Doctor of Divinity
- M.L.A. Master of Liberal Arts
- S.T.D. Doctor of Sacred Theology

**Religious Orders**

- A.A. Augustinians of the Assumption
- F.M.M. Franciscan Missionaries of Mary
- O.F.M. Cap. Order of Friars Minor Capuchin
- O.P. Order of Preachers
- O.P.L. Order of Preachers Laity
- O.S.B. Order of Saint Benedict
- O.S.F. Order of Sisters of Saint Francis
- S.J. Society of Jesus
- S.M. Society of Mary
- T.O.P. Third Order of Preachers
- T.O.P.L. Third Order of Preachers Laity
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It is ironic that I have been asked to write this foreword, because the reality that inspired this book so often goes beyond words for me. I have no word for the experience that is Our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Dominican Laity. And this for someone who is gifted with words and for whom crafting words is a vocation.

Timothy Radcliffe—a major player in the words that follow—once said:

Dominican spirituality is founded on the encounter of God in all of human experience … it is here, in our lives, with all of their creativity and goodness, their mess and confusion that God is to be found…. Our mission as preachers pushes us ‘to enter the unrest of the street and the inn, politics and journalism, welfare, teaching and science, in the belief that the holy, the traces of the Holy One, are to be found there.’ … Contemplation is not the discovery of God through retreat from the world…. It is opening your eyes to discover God waiting for us in the most unpromising situations…. We learn to see properly, to see in the dark, and above all to see compassionately, as God sees us.

I was privileged to witness the exchange of pure love that occurred on the day that Timothy visited the Chapter in prison. I heard him utter the words that became the title of this book: “I believe you are called to be a word of hope.” I felt then and I believe now that Timothy was exercising the act of contemplation he describes above, not describing a new task to be added on to the many tasks the members of this Chapter take on. He was not laying a new burden on them. He was describing what he was seeing: the God of hope present and alive among the men and women of Our Lady of Mercy at Norfolk Prison.

I have frequently quoted Catherine of Siena in my homilies and presentations to the group: “All the way to heaven is heaven.” I have heard enough times from men who have, by the grace of God, found this community in this unpromising place say what it means to them—enough times, I say, that I know that in embracing the Word who is Jesus Christ, these men are healed, they turn from their distorted view of the world, of relationships, of themselves, and they find love and acceptance for the first time. Many of them discover a new sense of freedom within, even when there are high walls without. They enter a school of mercy that they thought had been shut to them. They find a sense of dignity.
And this is a place where they do not have to deny their crimes or the bad things that they have done to gain these things. This is the place where the words, “amazing grace” take wing and fly, and carry them up. Here, they live as redeemed people, and because they dare to do so, others are brought into their circle of redemption. All the way to heaven is heaven.

I don’t have words for this phenomenon, because they are the Word embodied, the continuing incarnation of the Word of God’s love and compassion and mercy, the palpable power of God’s healing presence. *Their very existence is a word of hope.*

I do not say this naively. They are not proud. They will be the first to tell you that they have problems and struggles, issues and conflicts, some of them truly unique to the prison culture. Their co-founder and muse, chaplain and sister, Ruth, often struggles to figure out how to respond to these, how to continue in her gentle and amazing ways to make the fertile space that lets this singular Dominican culture thrive in this unpromising environment. She usually manages, even if in her precocious wisdom it is simply a matter of allowing time to pass.

A sign to me that God is truly present here is how fertile that presence is, even apart from the growth of the Chapter itself, which started with nine members and now numbers in the thirties. From this chapter, the word of hope goes out, and just this day I have been privileged to witness the perpetual and temporary professions of four members of a new satellite chapter “on the outside,” two of whom are former prisoners from Our Lady of Mercy. Another was admitted into the novitiate and two others into postulancy. In October, I will witness the temporary profession of two men in a New Jersey prison who were inspired by Our Lady of Mercy and have completed their novitiate formation process with mentors from the group. We keep receiving letters from others all over the country inquiring about Dominican spirituality and wanting to be a part of this movement. The Word of Hope goes forth. No walls can stop it.

So, I have no words for this amazing grace that God has seen fit to make happen in Norfolk prison. But I have a heart filled with gratitude that gets stirred in unspeakable ways when I am with the community. And I can see, as Timothy suggests, the incredible power of the loving and living God still active in our otherwise unpromising and hurting world. What a word of hope! What a gift to behold!

Reverend Wayne Cavalier, OP
It is said that, “All roads lead to Rome.” What is not said is what those roads are made of. The construction material on this particular road is not macadam, or bituminous, nor like in some places in the Orient, rock from the hillsides. In considering this road that was in the process of being constructed just outside the Boston area, one would think that the road would have been smooth cobblestones that were used during these many decades. This road, however, was made of a different type of material; its foundation was the naysayers, no-ways, a thousand whys, and hundreds of stumbling blocks. There was one material in this road that few could see. Down its center was a long and narrow causeway made of faith.

It was this road, with all its ups and downs, that a young woman traveled. It was her faith in her creator and the desire to continue the vision of a young Dominican priest, Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., which ignited a fire within her to reach Rome. Her petition was always ready and studded with clarity and purpose. Along this road, there was laughter as well as tears. There were obstacles to overcome, but the desire was there to keep forging ahead. The road ran from a prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, through Montferrand-le-Château, France, to the Eternal City known as Rome.

I never set out to find this road or to write this book, but we all travel down many roads during our lifetime. Sometimes we make a wrong turn and end up on a dark unlit road on the wrong side of the tracks. Through an unfortunate set of turns, the road I was on led me to the gates of that same Massachusetts prison, but in shackles. It was there that I met that woman and her traveling companion, a Franciscan Sister. Together they were gathering lost souls and preparing them for travel down that road made of faith.

This is the story of their journey, their trials and tribulations, and the souls they encountered along the way. I cannot thank them enough for guiding me down this road. Most of all, this story is a testament to the vision of Père Lataste.

Dennis J. Beldotti, OPL
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to especially note the help of Reverend Joseph Fredette, A.A., who read, edited, and formatted the entire manuscript. I also want to thank William Roberts who gave me the benefit of his insightful comments. I am grateful to all the members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter who have read parts of the manuscript and discussed their ideas with me or assisted me in some other way. I would also like to thank Reverend Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., and Reverend Wayne Cavalier, O.P., not only for their contributions to this manuscript, but also for their commitment over all these years to the miracle known as Our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic.

It is hard to acknowledge adequately the many contributions of Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., and Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., and thank them properly for all they have done. They have willingly read and reread drafts of this manuscript, discussed the contents with me, and consistently given me helpful insight when problems arose. Their patience, unconditional love, and continued support have not only made the completion of this work possible, but have so greatly enriched my life. I want to thank them as best I can for being the persons they are.
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PROLOGUE

This story actually begins one hundred and forty-three years ago when, in September 1864, a young Dominican priest, Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., was sent to preach a spiritual retreat at the women’s prison in Cadillac-sur-Garrone, France, near Bordeaux. He went there with skepticism and all the preconceived notions pertaining to the incarcerated, which permeated society. He would later confess to a friend, “I entered with considerable embarrassment, persuaded that the undertaking would prove futile.”¹

During the retreat there was a transformation. Père Lataste was the first to be converted by what he preached, and then the Word of God touched the prisoners’ hearts. During the retreat, Père Lataste kept asking himself, what would happen to these women when they left prison. Society would surely mark and stigmatize them as former prisoners, which would draw them back down that dark road of sin. Who would help them? While praying with the prisoners in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he came up with a radical idea for that time—to found a new religious congregation for women coming out of prison. The answer he proposed was called the House of Bethany. Why Bethany? Père Lataste explained:

The Gospel tells us that at Bethany there lived two sisters: Martha of inviolable virtue and Mary Magdalene who had been a sinner. Jesus loved to come and rest in their home, where one served him and the other listened to his words. He made no distinction between them—or did he…? It is rather Magdalene who is preferred. Martha is surprised and Jesus answers kindly but still gives preference to Magdalene: “You worry and fret about so many things; yet, few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the ‘better part’ and it is not to be taken from her.” (Luke 10:41). What was the better part? It was that Magdalene loved more. She who had been a sinner had advanced further in the way of divine love than Martha, the model of virtue. When God loves us and gives us his grace, he does not ask us what we have been; he is only concerned with what we are—not with how far we have fallen, but with how much we love. He judges us only on the strength of our love. Happy are those whose past urges them on to a greater love, and happy those others who, in a sort of rivalry, redouble their own efforts in order not to be left behind.²

Today, with the escalating cost of incarceration and high recidivism rates, there is a need for prison reform. In Massachusetts, the last two administrations have called for a return to
rehabilitation and a retreat from the Draconian philosophy of re-introducing prisoners to the “joy of busting rocks” of prior administrations.

Père Lataste understood prison reform and the need for rehabilitation. In an effort to build support for Bethany, in 1866, he published a booklet entitled, *Les Réhabilitées* (Rehabilitated Women). In it Père Lataste wrote:

>This idea of rehabilitation is not new. At the present time, society is manifesting a keen interest in such problems. We can no longer remain passive spectators of this kind of suffering. As [we see] so many barriers and class distinctions being broken down, we may well be surprised that this problem still remains.3

Père Lataste’s propositions in *Les Réhabilitées* are as valid today as they were in 1866. He regarded conditions in prison as favorable for spiritual growth. He asserted that what prisoners needed were:

>…a home, a family, where they will be loved and esteemed. The world, with all its power and riches, cannot give them this—it is the work of God. But religion alone cannot do it because, though rich with the gifts of heaven, she is poor in the riches of this world. So, let the world and religion unite and the work will be accomplished. Let those who possess riches put them at the disposal of those who have nothing, and this great work will be born.4

Père Lataste concluded *Les Réhabilitées* by stating:

>Now you understand our aim and the means by which it can be achieved. You have seen the problem and you have seen how it can be solved. These [prisoners] are worthy of your compassion. It is for you to give them some recompense for those long years of prison. Dishonored in the past but long ago rehabilitated before God, they must now be rehabilitated before humanity. They must be saved, not only from the past dishonor, but from that inevitable return to crime; they must be saved, not only for this life, but for eternity; they must be saved out of love for him who said: ‘The Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost.’5

The congregation that Père Lataste founded with Mère Henri-Dominique would come to be known as the Dominican Sisters of Bethany. From France to Switzerland, to Italy, to Belgium and eventually to the United States, the Dominican Sisters of Bethany would prosper and grow. Père Lataste’s vision for the rehabilitation of prisoners, the rejected, and for all sinners to a new life in God continues to this day. His spirit and vision are alive. They have journeyed across the Atlantic to a prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts. The radical ideals of St. Dominic and Père Lataste continue to spread across the United States and to all corners of the world.
ERECTION OF THE FRATERNITY

I, Brother David Dominic Izzo, O.P., Prior Provincial of the Province of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Order of Preachers, consider it to be among the more important parts of my Office to expand the Association of our Third Order and help it to flourish; this Association has certainly been endowed with the greatest privileges, indulgences and other apostolic favours.

Therefore, approving pious requests and petitions, by means of these present documents and according to the norm of canon 312, after receiving the consent of the local ordinary, with the apostolic authority granted to me by privilege I institute the Fraternity of the Third Order named Our Lady of Mercy Chapter in Norfolk, Massachusetts in the Archdiocese of Boston.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All else to the contrary notwithstanding.

In witness whereof we have signed this document as a testimony and affixed our seal.

Given on the twenty-second day of the month of February, the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, in this the bicentennial year of our Province, two thousand and five.

The Very Reverend D. Dominic Izzo, O.P.
Prior Provincial

Edward Raymond Daley, O.P.
The Very Reverend Edward Raymond Daley, O.P.
Socius

Seal
“Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”
—Isaiah 43:18-19

BEGINNINGS

On 1 June 1927, twelve prisoners from the Charlestown State Prison in Charlestown, Massachusetts, were transferred to Norfolk, Massachusetts, to begin construction of a new prison on the grounds of a former hospital for the treatment of alcoholics, and later, a rehabilitation camp for the care of World War I veterans suffering from battle wounds and chronic illness. Subsequently, an additional 150 Charlestown prisoners were transferred to assist in the construction of the Norfolk Penal Colony.

The first superintendent, Howard B. Gill (1889-1988), saw the Norfolk Penal Colony (now MCI Norfolk) as an advancement in the rehabilitation of prisoners. Prisoners were to be given greater freedom of action, fewer restrictions, more privileges, and a share in the development and operation of the activities of the community. In return, the prisoners would assume their share of the responsibility for the good conduct of the community as a whole.

Today, MCI Norfolk is a medium security prison situated on thirty-five acres of land. It is the largest prison in Massachusetts, housing between 1300 and 1400 prisoners on an average day. With the exception of its surrounding nineteen-foot wall, the prison gives the appearance of a college campus. MCI Norfolk continues to lead in the area of new programs for prisoner rehabilitation in Massachusetts.

The Dominican spirit arrived at MCI Norfolk in 1988, when Ruth Raichle was invited to join the chaplaincy team.1 Ironically, that same year, *Hope Beyond Hope: The Story of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany* was translated and published in English.2 Raichle had been a member of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany in Millis, Massachusetts, for eight years but left the Order before making her final vows. The sisters have since closed their foundations in the United States and have all returned to Europe. In 1989, Raichle invited Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., to join her in ministry at MCI Norfolk.
In 1992, Raichle and Sr. Denevan founded Bethany House Ministries. Its mission was rooted in the spirit of Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., and in the Gospel. Père Lataste recognized through his work with prisoners that God’s love has the power to heal, transform, and renew what to many may seem hopeless. With this mission in mind, Bethany House Ministries contracted with the Massachusetts Department of Correction for the Catholic chaplaincy at MCI Norfolk.

In the ensuing years, chaplains Raichle and Sr. Denevan recruited many members from the Dominican Order to minister to the men inside MCI Norfolk. On 6 January 1997, the Feast of the Epiphany, Father Norman Alfred Haddad, O.P., officially named the Catholic community at MCI Norfolk, “Bethany-Norfolk.”

From the birth of Père Lataste’s Bethany in Cadillac Prison, to the Bethany-Norfolk community at MCI Norfolk, emerged our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic.
PLANTING THE SEED

Inspired by Père Lataste, Raichle first envisioned the possibility of a Dominican Laity chapter at MCI Norfolk in 1997. In August of that year, she wrote to the Prior Provincial, The Very Reverend Norman Alfred Haddad, O.P., about her idea. Fr. Haddad, who was traveling at the time, had his Socius, Father Kevin D. Robb, O.P., reply. On 3 September, Fr. Robb informed Raichle that he had forwarded her package of materials to the Provincial Promoter, Father Joseph P. Allen, O.P., who would be in touch with her directly.

One week later, Fr. Allen replied to Raichle. In his letter he gave a brief explanation of what would be required of a new chapter. Because of the uniqueness of a chapter within the confines of a prison, Fr. Allen suggested the possibility of a satellite chapter if some other chapter would agree to the relationship. He offered to bring the matter up at the Council Meeting at Providence College on 1 November 1997, if Raichle would make a formal request to him.

Raichle responded immediately to Fr. Allen’s offer and sent him her formal request. In her letter to Fr. Allen, she described what goes on within the Catholic community at the prison:

What we, Sr. Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., whom I work and live with, and myself, are witnessing at Norfolk Prison is truly God’s Grace. We have tried to re-create a Parish Community within the Prison walls. The Bethany Catholic Community at Norfolk Prison has a Parish Council with 8 inmates. The prisoners themselves take on the roles of Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Choir members, and Outreach ministers. They are involved in weekly prayer groups, Scripture Study, and Scripture Sharing, Cursillo weekends, and Cursillo Reunions, Recovery Groups, and discussion groups. Twice a week we have Eucharistic Adoration. Some of the men pray the Office of the Church every day in order to be united with the Church. They take this very seriously.

Raichle went on to impart what she felt the establishment of a Dominican Laity chapter at the prison would mean:

I believe that the establishment of a Dominican Laity Chapter at Norfolk Prison could be a powerful source of hope for the men at Norfolk Prison, for the Dominican Order, and for the Church. Fr. Lataste said that the greatest sinners have the potential to become the greatest saints. Sr. Kathleen and myself have given witness to the truth of these words.
Having received Raichle’s formal request, Fr. Allen sent materials to her so that she could begin the formation of the men at the prison. A Lay Dominican chapter was conceived at MCI Norfolk when, on 3 January 1998, chaplains Raichle and Sr. Denevan invited several prisoners to discuss Dominican Spirituality. On the afternoon of 25 January 1998, several men and chaplains Raichle and Sr. Denevan met with three guests from the Dominican Province of St. Joseph. After sharing, there was a desire by all in the group to move towards inclusion in the Dominican Laity and a decision to continue to meet every Sunday afternoon.

Beginning in early February 1998, nine prisoners, chaplains Raichle and Sr. Denevan, and three outside volunteers gathered in the Catholic Office to study and to pray for acceptance into the Dominican Order. The Provincial Council would be meeting on 25 April 1998 in Washington, DC, and decide the fate of the group. According to Fr. Allen’s suggestion, the group would be seeking to become a satellite chapter of the Community of the Resurrection Pro-Chapter in Casco, Maine. While waiting for the decision, the men continued to meet and pray the Divine Office.

Finally, on 24 May, Raichle gathered the group together to share Fr. Allen’s letter on the Council’s vote. Their request was rejected. Fr. Allen stated:

> For many reasons it was decided by vote that I was not to advance this proposal for a Third Order Chapter. Further, I was requested not to allow the formation modules to be used, which I indicated to the councilors that I had already mailed you at least the postulancy materials. The council indicated that I could support the idea of communicating at least general information about the Dominicans and the history and purpose of the Lay Dominicans as well as support your efforts with the parishioners for praying the Liturgical Office.

The news was met with pain and tears. The men, however, put their rejection into God’s hands. They decided to persevere and continue to pray for acceptance. As Raichle would later write:

> I was deeply moved by their [the prisoners’] response, which was one of love, not bitterness. We are discovering as a group that this process has been a holy one, and that it is God’s work, not ours. One of our members shared with us that for him, as it is for all of us, it is the journey that is the most important, not the destination. We leave that in God’s hands.
“Divine society is above human society. What the latter cannot achieve, the former can. What is impossible for human beings is always possible for God.”
—Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.
*Les Réhabilitées*, 1866

**THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL**

Raichle informed the Dominican Sisters of Bethany in France of the sad news. Sister Imelda of the Rosary, O.P., who knew the Master of the Order, The Very Reverend Timothy Joseph Radcliffe, O.P., wrote to him concerning the Council’s rejection of the men’s request to become part of the Dominican family. Fr. Radcliffe responded to Sr. Imelda, expressing his feelings concerning the Council’s vote, “I am most distressed over the Council’s vote. For me it is wonderful that a group of prisoners could wish to become Lay Dominicans, and it is profoundly painful to hear of their rejection.” Fr. Radcliffe went on to say that, he had written the Provincial in New York to see what he thinks could be done and how they may be able to proceed.

The final three months of the year were filled with activity. Sr. Imelda sent a copy of Fr. Radcliffe’s letter to Raichle. In turn, Raichle sent her own letter to Fr. Radcliffe thanking him for his support, and providing him with a description of the Catholic community at MCI Norfolk.

On 26 October, the group met to discuss the direction they were taking. The consensus was to remain with practicing Dominican Spirituality and persevere through praying the Holy Rosary and the Divine Office together.

The group gathered on 14 November to discuss the execution of Jonathan Wayne Nobles who had been executed in Texas on 7 October 1998. In 1986, Nobles was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. While in prison, Nobles had a conversion experience. He made his final profession into the Dominican Laity in 1991, as a member of the St. Martin de Porres Chapter. In an article about Nobles’ last day, Carl Trutter, O.P.L., wrote:

> On Wed., Oct. 7, the day of his execution, Jonathan fasted. When it came time for the traditional last meal, he asked Bishop Carmody only for the Holy Eucharist. Bishop Carmody said, “He called it ‘Spiritual food for the journey home.’ It’s all that he wanted; it’s all that he would have. That’s a profound statement of faith.”
Nobles’ conversion and death would come to have a profound effect on the events leading up to Our Lady of Mercy’s acceptance into the Dominican Laity.

The group’s spirit continued to be lifted when several members received reply letters from the Master of the Order. In those letters, Fr. Radcliffe assured the group of his full support in their gaining acceptance into the Dominican Order.

More good news! In early December, the group shared a copy of a letter Laurie Anne Biszko, o.p.l., the Provincial Council President, sent to Sister Renata Camenzind, o.p.l.5 In it Biszko stated that she had learned of the execution of Nobles in November 1998, when she attended the Dominican Laity Inter-Provincial Council in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was moved by the homilist who spoke on Nobles. After coming home she wrote to the Prior Provincial, Fr. Haddad, and to Fr. Radcliffe to ask permission to assume responsibility for the prison ministry at Norfolk. Biszko received permission from Fr. Radcliffe for the group’s formation.6 In addition, she notified the Provincial Promoter, Fr. Allen, that while she was overstepping her authority in not respecting the Council’s decision, she “firmly believed that you must welcome those prisoners into the Dominican Family with open arms.”7

In early February, Biszko sent the group a letter calling them a “Dominican entity” as they could not be considered a chapter without the Council’s affirmative vote. She was optimistic, however, and stated, “I feel that through the prayers of the men and the intercession of Jonathan [Nobles] the vote will be affirmative to establish an ‘official’ Chapter at the prison.”8 Biszko also invited Raichle, Sr. Denevan, and Sr. Renata to attend the Provincial Council meeting in Washington, DC, on 23-25 April 1999, to personally present the group’s request for admission.9

Letters from around the world were being sent in support of the group’s application to become a pro-chapter. Father Stephen Ryan, o.p., wrote to the Provincial Promoter, Fr. Allen, stating, “It is clear that there is great holiness (e.g., a serious sharing of the meaning of the Gospel in their lives) amongst this group that God is at work in their community.”10 Fr. Ryan went on to voice his opinion of the last Council vote and his hope for the upcoming vote:

I understand that there are some members of the Dominican Laity who are still opposed in principle to admitting prisoners to profession. While my familiarity with members of the Dominican Laity in the Province is limited, I was, as a Dominican, embarrassed for our Province when I heard how the Norfolk Bethany community has been treated. The
refusal to admit prisoners to profession seems to be indefensible and I think that one
would do well to challenge it. Everything about the history of the Order seems to argue
against this refusal. Perhaps a charitably conducted international Dominican disputatio
is in order! I fear for our future if we get this wrong.\textsuperscript{11}

Biszko continued her push for the formation of the chapter. On 26 March 1999, she sent the
group a letter discussing the upcoming Provincial Council meeting. In a postscript, she suggested
a possible name for the chapter, Our Lady of Mercy.\textsuperscript{12} The name was unanimously accepted upon
hearing it.
On 27 April 1999, Raichle called all the men in the group to her office. She appeared solemn as they assembled. The men thought the worse. Unable to keep her composure for long, she jubilantly announced, “We’ve been accepted!” Tears of joy and thanksgiving flowed from every eye in the room at the news.¹

On 9 May, a letter arrived from Biszko expressing her excitement over the acceptance, “What joy it brings me to know that today you officially begin your entry into the postulancy period of your Dominican journey.”² In her letter, Biszko suggested 7 October for the official reception.³ The 7th of October was the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary; it also happened to be the one-year anniversary of Jonathan Wayne Nobles’ execution—a perfect date for the official reception.

On 16 May 1999, nine prisoners, three outside volunteers, and Raichle began their journey with their first postulancy formation. They were joined by Sr. Denevan, who because of her Franciscan affiliation and her help in establishing the Dominican Pro-Chapter, has since been nicknamed by the prisoners their “Franican” sister.

The happiness within the group was short lived. In July, another stumbling block was put in front of them. An e-mail was received from the Director of the Office for Prison Ministry of the Archdiocese of Boston, Deacon William F. X. Kane, which stated, “For the time being, Bishop Murphy and Fr. O’Brien have instructed me to tell you to take no further action in this matter or engage in any additional activity in furtherance of this effort for the time being.”⁴ Deacon Kane went on to state that Bishop William Murphy, Moderator of the Curia, “made it clear that further consultation with Cardinal Law will be necessary before any further action with the Dominican Third Order is initiated by you.”⁵

This correspondence created a flurry of activity on both sides of the Atlantic. Raichle and Sr. Denevan responded with a proposal to the Archdiocese of Boston to obtain recognition of the
Dominican Lay Council’s approval to form a Pro-Chapter of the Dominican Laity at MCI Norfolk.

In their proposal, Raichle and Sr. Denevan stated:

We believe that to have a group of spiritually mature men who have been formed in the Dominican Tradition of participating in the apostolic mission of the Church through prayer, study and proclamation of the Word of God would only enhance the Pastoral Plan of the Prison Ministry for the Archdiocese of Boston.6

When word of the setback reached Rome, the Master of the Order, Fr. Radcliffe, sent a letter to His Eminence Bernard Francis Cardinal Law. In his letter, Fr. Radcliffe stated:

I am writing in connection with the newly founded fraternity of the Dominican Laity at Norfolk Prison. I am informed that some questions have been raised as to its future and that Bishop Murphy has asked that it not be developed until there is further consultation with Your Eminence. I am writing to ask for your support of this new foundation. It is worth adding that I am writing to you entirely on my own initiative and not as a result of any request for my intervention.

Pastoral care of prisoners has always been a valued and traditional Dominican ministry, from the very beginning of the Order. It has always been recognized as an expression of that compassion which was so characteristic of St. Dominic. St. Catherine of Siena was famous for her love of prisoners, and especially of those condemned to die.

In recent years this commitment has found expression in welcoming prisoners into the Dominican family…. Father Lataste, whose beatification is believed to be imminent, founded a Congregation of Dominican sisters which included working in prisons as central to their Dominican charism, and which specifically and from the beginning welcomed prisoners into the Order.7

Fr. Radcliffe concluded his letter by stating, “I therefore see the foundation of this new fraternity as not an exception but as the fruit of a long tradition of which the Order is proud, and to which I am happy to give my wholehearted support.”8

On 21 July 1999, Bishop Murphy responded to Raichle and Sr. Denevan acknowledging receipt of their proposal. In his letter he stated:

Please be assured that I am in no way opposed to your idea. I simply want to make sure that it goes forward in the proper way. To that end, I have asked Father Paul O’Brien if he, Kelly Dunn and Father Wagner of Saint Stephen Priory, might meet with you in order that we could have a full understanding of just what is implied by your proposal and how that would relate to the Dominicans as well as how it would relate to the Archdiocese.9

On 2 August 1999, His Eminence Bernard Francis Cardinal Law visited the men at MCI Norfolk. Before celebrating a confirmation Mass, during lunch Cardinal Law mentioned to Raichle that he had received a letter from Fr. Radcliffe and was giving his blessings to the group.
On 23 September 1999, the group received a letter from Deacon Kane. In it he wrote, “I am writing to inform you that you have formal permission from the Archdiocese of Boston to resume your efforts to establish a Chapter of the Dominican Third Order at MCI-Norfolk.” Upon receiving the news, the men joyously continued to move forward.

The group also received a letter from Father Chrys Finn, o.p., Vicar of the Master of the Order, expressing wishes from all the brothers of the Curia Generalitia, Convento Santa Sabina, for the upcoming reception. In his letter Fr. Finn stated:

I know that this will be a special day for you and also a wonderful and happy occasion for Ruth Raichle, who has worked tirelessly to see this dream come to fruition. You begin your novitiate on the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, a very special Dominican Feast. May Our Lady of the Rosary, Mother of Mercy, continue to take you under her protection.

Please do know our prayers and support are with you. May this pro-chapter flourish and bear much fruit. The Dominican Family is honored by your presence and your enthusiasm to live and promote the spirit of St. Dominic.
“Whatever may have been your past, do not any longer consider yourselves inmates, but people consecrated to God.”
—Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.

**COMMITMENT TO SAINT DOMINIC**

On a beautiful New England fall day, nine prisoners, three outside volunteers, and chaplain Raichle made their way into the chapel at MCI Norfolk. It was 7 October 1999, the day the Church honors Mary as Our Lady of the Rosary and the day that the first members of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter were to be received into the Dominican family.

The chapel was filled to overflowing with men from the prison community and guests from the outside, including Sr. Renata, Sister Martin Dominique Austen, O.P.L., Sister Donna Petit, O.S.F., Deacon Robert Alence, and of course, the men’s “Franican” sister, Sr. Denevan. Fr. Haddad, the Prior Provincial, was scheduled to preside. Fr. Ryan, Father Virgilio Oliviera, S.J., and Father George Szal, S.M., assisted him.

Biszko stood between Fr. Haddad and Fr. Ryan. She had been given the honor of receiving the members with Fr. Haddad and placing the Dominican pin on them. Biszko greeted the postulants stating:

> Dear brothers and sisters in St. Dominic. What a joy it brings me to know that today you officially begin your entry into the novitiate period of your Dominican journey. As Dominicans we are always searching for ways to bring Jesus to others. Sometimes it is in what we say, and in other times it is in what we do not say. We strive to become living beacons of hope in a world that is often overshadowed by the darkness of untruth. Through our study and prayer we strive to become more like Jesus and by our actions we try to bring a taste of His joy to others. I know that each of you will try to become the light of Christ to others within the prison. How fortunate for us to have you as Dominicans.

You could see the love in Biszko’s eyes as tears welled. She later commented that she felt unconditional love that day in the chapel.

During the Liturgy, the Dominican Sisters of Bethany in France and around the world were praying special rosaries. The Sisters and Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter are united through prayers, letters, the love of Jesus, and the spirit of Père Lataste.
Many letters and cards of congratulations were received from around the world. The Dominican Sisters of Bethany in Turin, Italy, wrote, “We have learned by Sr. Rose Marie about the beginning of a novitiate of Third Order Dominicans at Norfolk Prison. We are all touched deeply about this and filled with joy. The miracle of Cadillac Prison continues!”  

From the Vicar of the Master of the Order, Fr. Finn, came, “We all know that reception into the Dominican Laity marks a beginning. All your brothers here at Santa Sabina pray that this beginning will continue to blossom and bear much fruit.”

The following week, each member of the Pro-Chapter received a pressed rose petal for their Bibles to commemorate the day. The roses had been on the altar during the Liturgy at the Reception Mass. Several of the new novices recorded their personal reflections in the Chronicles for the community:

- We are truly one in spirit and one in the Lord. Thank you for your many signs of love and support as we walk our journey of faith in the spirit of St. Dominic.
- You’ve blessed us with your prayers & support. Thank you and God bless you all.
- This is a special time for all of us and we need each other for prayer and community.
- I’m really happy to become a member of the Dominican Family. To me this is a blessing. We are one in Christ, live in one family.
- Your love of me has brought this ‘gift’ to me—forever grateful & united to you—I am.
- Thank you for all the love, support & prayers that you have bestowed on us and helping us with our journey with Christ! May God always watch over, bless and protect you!
- To my beautiful extended family—a family of love and caring. I thank you for your prayers & trust & support. I love you.
- As autumn closes and winter comes, some see cold and darkness on the way… but rather, I think the coming of Advent of Christmas of new beginnings is to be anticipated… this community allows for that optimism … it cares for it … in Christ’s name.

This was the time for new beginnings. Little did anyone realize just how much things were about to change.
A Word of Hope

“I believe that you are called to be a word of hope to your fellow prisoners, to the people who work here, and to your brothers and sisters beyond these walls.”
—Fr. Timothy Joseph Radcliffe, O.P.
MCI Norfolk, 29 July 2001

A WORD OF HOPE

“Where are we going?” That was the common question heard in Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter. The members were now received into the Dominican family, but were unclear as to what God held in store for them and the chapter. The Order that Dominic founded was the Order of Preachers, but as one prisoner said, “I cannot preach!”

While the members searched for their answer, other prisoners in the Bethany-Norfolk community became inspired by the men of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter and requested admittance. At a Mass on 23 January 2000, Fr. Ryan welcomed six additional men to the Pro-Chapter as postulants. The group continued to study and grow both in spirit and size.

To assist the men in their studies, both Biszko and Fr. Allen put out a call to the other chapters in the province seeking donations to establish a library of Dominican materials at the prison. Fr. Allen, as well as the prisoners of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, were overwhelmed by the outpouring of support given to them. The new library was immediately put to use by the men.

Prior to the 2000 reception Mass, the group received a letter from His Eminence Bernard Francis Cardinal Law offering his prayers for those making their temporary profession and those entering the novitiate. He concluded his letter with a paraphrase of Philippians 1:6, “May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment.”

At the reception Mass held on 7 October 2000, all thirteen novices made their temporary profession while five postulants were received into the novitiate. Nine additional prisoners and one outside volunteer applied for and were accepted into the postulancy phase. In addition, five prisoners shared their desire to aspire to the postulancy the following year. God was moving these prisoners to be a beacon of light to those forgotten souls in the abyss that is MCI Norfolk.

What was happening to these men was best expressed in a letter to the members from a Dominican Sister of Bethany in Turin, Italy:
The external situation will not change for you, you will continue to be prisoners, but what you have started will give a new meaning to your life. You are free inside, the best freedom of all; no one can take it from you. One can be free inside even though at the same time, one is a prisoner outside. This is the type of liberty P. Lataste has suggested to live to the prisoners of Cadillac … the miracle has been repeated for you today.6

Little did the members know or understand, but their preaching ministry had begun. Less than two weeks after the 2000 reception Mass, Biszko sent an e-mail to Raichle stating that the moderator of the New Hampshire pro-chapter phoned her to say that:

It seems that he was at the retreat weekend for members of the diaconate in the Archdiocese of Boston and the priest mentioned how impressed he was by the service he attended in Norfolk Prison when several inmates made profession in the Dominican Third Order. Isn’t it amazing!! God is using these men to evangelize those on the outside … not only us, but priests, deacons and other lay people.7

At approximately the same time, the general assembly was meeting in Manila, Philippines. On 27 October 2000, Fr. Radcliffe, the Master of the Order, gave his keynote address. It was a reflection on a passage from the Gospel of John. Fr. Radcliffe stressed the equality of the different branches of the Order and how all are called to be preachers. As one example, he described how the members of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter are called to be preachers:

One of my favorite lay fraternities is in Norfolk prison in Massachusetts, in the United States. The members of that fraternity cannot go elsewhere. If they try they will be stopped forcibly. But they are preachers in that prison, sent to be a word of hope in a place of suffering. They are sent as preachers to a place to which most of us cannot go.8

As the group continued to develop, it was necessary for them to have a Spiritual Director. Fr. Haddad, the Prior Provincial, officially appointed Father Wayne Cavalier, O.P., as Spiritual Director of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, effective 1 November 2000.9 Fr. Cavalier, who was from the Southern Province, first celebrated Mass with the group on 5 March 2000, at the request of Fr. Ryan who was leaving the area. Fr. Ryan had been acting as the group’s Spiritual Director, but not in an official capacity.10

On 29 July 2001, the men and women of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter had the honor of welcoming Fr. Radcliffe, who had just ended his term as the Master of the Order. The men had invited Fr. Radcliffe when they heard he was going to be in Providence, Rhode Island, for the Dominican Order’s General Chapter meeting. As the prison was not far away, Fr. Radcliffe readily agreed to the visit, as he wanted to meet the members of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter. Accompanying Fr. Radcliffe to the prison were Brother Angel Mendez, O.P., from the Southern
Province, Father Steven Fitzhenry, O.P., from St. Stephen’s Priory in Dover, Massachusetts, and Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter’s Spiritual Director, Fr. Cavalier.

At the prison, Fr. Radcliffe celebrated Mass for all present and then graciously fielded some questions from the members. One of the men asked Fr. Radcliffe what he felt their vocation should be. Fr. Radcliffe responded, “I believe that you are called to be a word of hope to your fellow prisoners, to the people who work here, and to your brothers and sisters beyond these walls.” It was a message which the members live by today. During the visit, the members presented Fr. Radcliffe with several gifts including a cross, made from woven paper and a paper rose for each attendee of the General Chapter meeting.

Later, Fr. Radcliffe posed for photographs with all the members. It was an unforgettable day for all the prisoners and outside volunteers who met the former Master of the Order to thank him for all the support he had given them in their endeavors to become accepted in the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic. In his book, *Seven Last Words*, Fr. Radcliffe would later write about his visit:

This cross was made by members of the Lay Dominican Fraternity at Norfolk Prison, in Massachusetts. Most of our brothers there are serving long sentences. Some will never obtain parole. During the General Chapter in Rhode Island, on July 29, 2001, I went to spend some time with them. I thought that I would have to cheer them up but they gave me enormous joy. Among the gifts that they gave me was a statue of St. Dominic carved out of wax, and this cross made of paper. For reasons of security they are not allowed to use more solid materials.

On this cross they have written their names. We do not know the name of the person to whom Jesus promised Paradise as he hung on the cross. But every day I can see the names of these brothers of mine who endure their own crucifixion. They asked me what might be their vocation as members of the Order of Preachers in this prison. I suggested that they might be preachers of hope. And this is what they are, for those inside and outside the prison. When I left they gave me 200 lovely paper roses, one for each of the members of the General Chapter. That was also a preaching of the gospel, and the sharing of a hope for happiness.

At the tip of the cross they have written the motto of the Order ‘Truth’, and also ‘Sing a New Song’, the title of my first book. Their presence in that prison is a planting of the gospel truth in a dark place, where they sing a new song far better than I ever could.11

The day following Fr. Radcliffe’s visit, Fr. Cavalier reflected on his feelings about that day to Raichle:

Both Timothy and Angel were deeply moved by it. They kept saying, “That was so moving!” Angel is telling everyone at the Chapter about it. Then they come to tell me that they heard it was a wonderful experience!
I asked Timothy what his impression was, and he said the strongest impression was the way they made him feel loved. He said everyone was so loving and welcoming from the moment he walked in.

My feeling is that I was witness to two of the most powerful manifestations of the grace of St. Dominic that I know—Timothy and Our Lady of Mercy Dominican Laity—coming together to celebrate our shared charism. I too am deeply moved, and I will never forget that momentous occasion.

Do you know what good work you are doing? Thank you for letting me share it!12

Following the General Chapter meeting, many of the attendees wrote to the members of Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter. It was an outpouring of unexpected gratitude for the prisoners’ simple gesture. As Father Philip McShane, o.p., wrote, “Your roses arrived at the General Chapter and sat on everyone’s desk—reminding us of you. You were talked about and people thought about you.”13

Upon his return to Rome, Fr. Radcliffe sent a handwritten note to the members:

My dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you for that wonderful time that we had together a week ago. It was unforgettable. I felt as if I was coming home when I met you. I met Christ in you. Thank you for those marvelous presents which I shall always treasure. I gave a paper flower to every member of the General Chapter & then told them about you all. They clapped & clapped & promised their prayers. So your Chapter & the General Chapter have been so close all week. I put up the picture of the fraternity so that everyone can see what you look like. Carlos will write you too.16 Pray for me as I do for you. May you be a word of hope for all whom you meet!

With love from your brother in St. Dominic, Timothy15

Shortly thereafter, the group received a letter from the newly elected Master of the Order, The Very Reverend Carlos Alphonsus Aspiroz Costa, O.P., stating:

For some time now I’ve been wanting to write this letter, not only personally but also in the name of the friars reunited at the General Elective Chapter at Providence from the 10th of July until the 8th of August.

Once arrived at Rome, without even finishing the Chapter, I wanted to send a very fraternal greeting to each and every one of you!

We are all very happy that Fr. Timothy was able to visit with you all. He has transmitted to us your happiness, your fervor, your fraternity, and also filled the hall at the Chapter reunion with the beautiful flowers. Thank you for that beautiful detail.

I also have with me the card that was sent for me with the signatures and brief message from each one as sincere proof of your friendship.
God loves us with friendship and for that reason, the night that Jesus was about to be turned over, in his intimacy at the fraternal table, he wanted to call us his friends (John 15:15). St. Dominic has desired especially that his sons and daughters discover this friendship with which Jesus loves us. He himself has been a true friend of our Lord. Faithful with this model of life we wish to offer you our friendship. For them I am grateful from the bottom of my heart for your greetings and fraternal love.

In fact, for the imperfect happiness of this world, made with tears and with exertion—it is indispensable the joyful presence of our friend who alleviates us, who sustains us, who elevates us, and who brings us to perfection. His discovery establishes in the miseries of time, the most valuable richness.

May the Lord bless you, Mary care for you as she did Jesus, and St. Dominic fill your hearts with the happiness and compassion that comes from the Gospel of our Lord. I also send you my blessings from the bottom of my heart. Don’t forget me in your prayers. I will keep you in mine.

Original: Spanish

The paper roses soon became a symbol for Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter. On 24 October 2001, Raichle received an e-mail from Father Jean-Marie Gueulette, o.p., which explained how he unexpectedly came upon the pro-chapter’s presence in France:

I was in St. Morillon and Cadillac with the young sisters and candidates of Bethany, from France, Switzerland and Slovaquia [sic], twelve of them. I taught them some insights about the life of Father Lataste and his work in Cadillac; we visited Cadillac castle. We celebrated the Mass in the parochial church of Cadillac, where our good Father Lataste was baptized. On the main altar, there was a Norfolk rose.

Word of what was happening at the prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, continued to spread. A week before the 2002 reception Mass, Raichle received an e-mail from Sister Gwenvaël, o.p., of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Beaufort in France. Sr. Gwenvaël wrote:

We are a community of Dominican nuns in Brittany in France, and ever since we heard of the amazing story of Norfolk we have wanted to write to you, but we didn’t have your address…. We pray for you often and we follow news we get about you all, as Timothy said you are Preachers of Hope—it’s an incredible message for humanity, and a real inspiration for us. Sister Rose Marie (of Béthanie) sent us a photo of the new novices, and of the Echoes of Truth Choir—what joy on each face!

I am especially happy to write to you because in a few weeks time I will undertake my first profession in the Order of Preachers, on Monday, 14 October, during Mass at 11 o’clock. Please remember me in your prayers! I have always been very touched by the story of Norfolk. I think of you often, your mission is so important! Continue to preach the mercy of God by your life, continue to be witnesses of the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

The 2002 reception Mass was held on 29 September. As with the past reception Masses, the chapel was packed with prisoners and outside guests. That year, the Mass was celebrated by Father
Frank Sutman, O.P., who was the Pro-Chapter’s Spiritual Director at the time. He was assisted by Fr. Cavalier and Fr. Oliviera. After the reception Mass, Sr. Renata expressed to Raichle and Sr. Denevan her reflections:

Oh, it was an honor to be present at the reception and profession of our brothers. They are wonderful and a true inspiration. I can see the changes in there from one year to the other. They have found love and a purpose in life.19

On 5 October 2003, history was once again made at MCI Norfolk. The prison chapel was filled to capacity with prisoners and outside guests. They were there to witness five prisoners, three outside volunteers and chaplain Raichle make their final profession, a promise to live according to the spirit of St. Dominic and the Rule of the Dominican Laity for the rest of their lives. The Provincial Promoter, Father James M. Sullivan, O.P., presided over the reception Mass. Fr. Cavalier, Father Joseph McDermott, Father Richard Clifford, S.J., and Father Douglas Mariouller, S.J., assisted him. Also assisting were Deacon Robert Alence, Deacon Richard Vaughn and Deacon Arthur Keefe. Among those in attendance were Sr. Martin Dominique, Sister Mary Beth Robinson, F.M.M., Sister Thao Phi, F.M.M., Sister Carol Ann Kane, F.M.M., the men’s “Franican” sister, Sr. Denevan, and twenty-six other outside guests. As noted in *The Dominican Torch*:


In addition, on that day, three men were received into the novitiate and eight men were accepted into the postulancy.
“What is rehabilitation? It is the ultimate restoration of someone to a previous condition for which the rights of moral fitness had been lost.”
—Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.
Les Réhabilitées, 1866

CHAPTER RECOGNITION

On Sunday afternoon, 26 September 2004, the community had the honor of having the Provincial Promoter, Fr. Sullivan, come to the prison for fellowship and to celebrate Mass. Fr. Sullivan gave encouragement for the group’s continued growth by announcing that they would soon become a full chapter, and that he would be contacting the Archdiocese of Boston when he returned to his office. The day concluded with much laughter, fraternal fellowship, and a blessing on the members by Fr. Sullivan.

On 31 October 2004, the group reached another major milestone by holding their first Chapter Council elections. Because of the unique situation of being located inside a prison, it was determined that the two Delegate positions would be held by the outside volunteer members as the prisoners obviously could not attend any of the meetings in the Province. The results of the first election yielded two prisoners being installed as Sub-Moderator and Secretary while the remainder of the positions were awarded to the outside volunteers. Raichle was unanimously voted in as Moderator of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. Subsequently, on 11 January 2005, Fr. Sullivan ratified the election results.

In November 2004, the prior Provincial, The Very Reverend David Dominic Izzo, O.P., requested consent from the Archdiocese of Boston for Our Lady of Mercy to become a full chapter of the Dominican Third Order. The Archdiocese responded on 17 December 2005, when Archbishop Seán P. O’Malley, O.F.M. Cap., gave his Consent of the Ordinary.

On 2 March 2005, Fr. Sullivan notified Raichle that on 22 February 2005, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, Fr. Izzo had approved Our Lady of Mercy as a full chapter in the Third Order of St. Dominic. The jubilation of the members, upon receipt of the news, could be heard in all the towns
surrounding the prison. With their new status, on 24 April 2005, the members unanimously adopted their mission statement:

To strive to *enflesh* the Gospel, and to illuminate hope in the hearts of all with whom God asks us to share the gift of life we have been given.
And what is it that makes them happy in such an austere life? The love of God!
—Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.

The Chapter Today

Père Lataste knew that, in order to survive and prosper, the community of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany had to have a mix of both those who had led “normal” lives as well as those who had come from the harsh life of the prison environment. Our Lady of Mercy Chapter also contains a mix of prisoners and individuals from outside the walls. Many may ask, how does someone from a “normal” life end up worshipping God with a group of prisoners? For the 2005 Congress, Faith D. Flaherty, O.P.L., wrote an article, “Escape to Prison,” describing her experiences as she transfiliated from an outside chapter to becoming a member of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. In the article, Flaherty starts by describing her initial apprehensions:

Another year or two passed by before I met Ruth [Raichle] again, at another regional meeting. This time I verbally committed myself to visit the prison. Ruth made the arrangements and I had to go. This was the moment to do it—visit—a prison, and a men’s prison at that! Yikes! Only for You, Jesus, would I push myself to do that!

Flaherty then goes on to relate what she first found behind the prison walls:

My first visit was a regular chapter meeting. Much to my surprise, it was pretty much the same as my chapter meetings at St. Stephen’s. However, there were differences, noticeable differences. Their Evening Prayer was chanted so poignantly, it was palpable. They were really participating in their prayers. The depth of their spirituality humbled me. I had avoided them because I thought them beneath me. Oh my God, thank you for teaching me how beautiful are all your children. I prayed to have their holiness, their piety, their humility, their childlike faith. Surprisingly. I found myself praying to be like them.

When Flaherty’s chapter at St. Stephen’s Priory, in Dover, Massachusetts, closed, the membership moved to St. Martin de Porres Chapter in Natick, Massachusetts. Flaherty, however, made a decision to transfiliate:

The one constant in this turmoil was the peace I felt in Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. I felt like I was escaping the world’s turbulence, inside the shelter of a prison. Every week I felt spiritually fed. After much prayer, I asked to transfiliate from the St. Martin de Porres Chapter to Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. Being one with my “cloistered brothers” is my community. This is where I belong. Their acceptance, improvement, knowledge, and Truth symbolize Christian to me…. I am proud to say that Our Lady of Mercy Chapter
is my chapter. I am proud of my Dominican brothers. And I am thankful that they have taught me that “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.”

The members from the outside are a valuable and integral part of the Chapter. As stated earlier, they hold offices that the prisoners, due to their incarceration, cannot fulfill. More than that, however, is the humanity aspect that the volunteers bring to the prisoners—the fact that members of the free society care and believe in their rehabilitation, that they share the same consecrated life.

While every outside volunteer plays a special role in the prisoners’ lives, in 2004, the Massachusetts Department of Correction recognized Our Lady of Mercy Chapter member, Joan Richard, O.P.L., as Volunteer of the Year at MCI Norfolk. It was the first time the Department of Correction honored a volunteer. Richard became involved in prison ministry in 1996. Two years later, in 2006, the Department of Correction named Our Lady of Mercy Chapter member, Charles Adams, O.P.L., as Volunteer of the Year at MCI Norfolk. Adams became involved in prison ministry in 1992. Both Richard and Adams were two of the Chapter’s founding members.

The prison population is a dynamic and ever changing environment. Prisoners get transferred to other prisons within the system for a variety of reasons. They also get released from prison on parole or by completing their sentences. Despite these fluctuations, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter continues to flourish.

As of the reception Mass, held on 15 October 2006, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter consisted of seventeen perpetually professed members, nine temporary professed, six novices, and seven postulants. Of these, thirty-two were prisoners and seven were from the outside. At that time, the chapter also had seven “friends,” including the prisoners’ “Franican” sister, Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., and Sister Mary Beth Robinson, F.M.M., who would take over the co-chaplain position when Sr. Denevan retired in 2007. Of course the members still had their beloved Religious Assistant, Fr. Cavalier.

Like Père Lataste’s women in Cadillac Prison, the men leaving MCI Norfolk wanted to continue their religious vocation on the outside. In response to their desire, on 15 January 2004, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter spawned a satellite pro-chapter, Hope of Bethany, outside the prison walls in Sherborn, Massachusetts. Making the transition from prison back into society can be difficult for many. For some, they have spent most of their lives separated from the rest of society. They are
returning to communities that do not want them, and with a stigma that prevents them from obtaining gainful employment.

In the article, “Can Anything Good Come Out of Norfolk Prison?” a former prisoner wrote, “‘Something I feared and many others too … that if and when we get out of prison would we lose that which we have at Our Lady of Mercy Norfolk … the people that I love and was loved by in return.’”7 The Hope of Bethany Pro-Chapter attempts to ease this transition by providing a place of acceptance for those coming out of prison that have chosen to remain part of the Dominican Family. In the same way as Père Lataste’s Dominican Sisters of Bethany, the Hope of Bethany Pro-Chapter consists of a mix of former prisoners and those coming from “normal” backgrounds.

Over the years, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter has received requests from around the world, from both prisoners and “outsiders,” inquiring as to how they can become involved in prison ministry and possibly start a prison-based Dominican chapter.8 In response to these inquiries, in 2005, Raichle, who was assisted by Sr. Denevan, Charles Adams, O.P.L., and Gary Stewart, O.P.L., a member of the Hope of Bethany Pro-Chapter, presented a workshop on prison ministry at the Third Order of St. Dominic Congress.9

That same year, at the State Penitentiary in La Grange, Kentucky, Father Bernard G. Dupont, O.P., distributed copies of the Divine Office and began instructing the prisoners in Dominican Spirituality. Two years later he wrote to Raichle stating:

I just had to share the good news with you that we now have eight Dominican Brothers in Novitiate Training. They were received into the Order two weeks ago by the Prioress of the Chapter, here at St. Louis Bertrand. The women felt that the “residents” just knew more about Dominican life than they did. They got in touch with the Provincial Promoter and the thing was done!

Happily for me, I can honestly say that I had nothing to do with all this. The accusation that I was “meddling” in other people’s affairs is already noised about. I can only laugh and wonder at the power of God’s mighty hand. Being grateful for your words of encouragement at the outset of this project, I just had to share this happy news with you.10

Fr. Dupont followed up in a later letter to Raichle stating:

So much is happening right now, I cannot being [sic] to describe it all except to say that the Holy Spirit is in charge and is bowling all obstacles aside. I am trying to let Him take the lead and keep out of His way! This is hard to describe but I am confident you understand.11
Recently two prisoners from New Jersey were assisted in their formation by members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter and, in March 2007, they were approved to become full members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. Because of their out-of-state incarcerations, however, while they are spiritually united, they are not able to physically attend the Chapter’s meetings. Notwithstanding this fact, the Provincial Promoter, Father Juan-Diego Brunetta, o.p., approved the men to make their Temporary Profession in October 2007 as members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter.

Père Lataste’s spirit and vision are alive today in a medium security prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, where the members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter strive to be a word of hope for others in like situations. It is their hope that Père Lataste’s spirit continues to spread throughout the world.
“I have seen things that astonished me; not so much external things, but occurrences that regard people’s souls. Never has a spiritual retreat or a mission, not even in the best of parishes, given me such great joy.”
—Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P.

BEHIND THE SCENES

This story would not be complete without the thoughts from some of the key figures who helped make the miracle known as Our Lady of Mercy Chapter happen. In looking back, Sr. Denevan reflects on the road that she and Raichle traveled:

For me, this very sacred journey began while Ruth and I were sitting in the Hermitage: a small shack in the woods on the property of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany in Millis, Massachusetts. With a simple, wooden likeness of St. Francis of Assisi to keep us “company” and a small potbelly stove to give warmth, we savored the quiet beauty of the eighteen acres of secluded woodlands and pasture. Ruth asked a simple question: “How would you like to live here?” Several months later, the two of us, along with two others moved in.

Bethany House, in Millis, Massachusetts, was “born” in 1989. Our dream was to make this house a home, and to create a community of men and women, religious and laity, whose ministry would be to serve in prison and to form a community which would welcome ex-offenders. For several years we struggled with forming such a community … so frustrated at times that it just didn’t happen. Meanwhile, we were both volunteer chaplains at Norfolk State prison. At some point in the nineties, we began to experience the beginnings of a community spirit emerging amongst the men and volunteers participating in our services and programs. In time, it became clear that God had a better idea about the formation of a community.

By 1997, sometime after we had become employed as chaplains at Norfolk, God’s “idea” finally became clear to us. The “community” we had hoped for had been emerging in our midst in Prison! We believed that this gift of God’s goodness to all of us needed to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated. And so, our prison community was blessed and given the name “Bethany” in a special Mass, presided over by Fr. Norman Haddad, O.P.

Over the years, the idea of forming a Dominican lay group composed of volunteers and men from our Bethany Norfolk Community continued to speak to Ruth’s heart. Her love for the message of Père Lataste, for our Dominican sisters in Europe, and for the spirit of St. Dominic led Ruth to begin the process of discerning the possibility. Once the decision was made to proceed, a small group from our Bethany community began their study of the teachings of St. Dominic under Ruth’s guidance. The rest is the miracle chronicled in this book.

Since I am a professed member of the Franciscan Order, my role in the founding of our Dominican lay Chapter was and remains one of companionship, advocacy, support, and encouragement to Ruth and to the group. I have been blessed to receive a special honorary membership and have been dubbed a “Franican” by the group. Such a singular
A Word of Hope

honor! St. Francis urged his followers to “Preach the Gospel, sometimes using words.” Both Dominic and Francis loved the Word … and preached the Word of Love. It is an honor to be a “Francican.”

Reflecting on the past 18 years of Bethany House’s existence and ministry, I have experienced the wisdom of the poet Rilke’s encouragement to “…live the questions … and grow into the answer….” We have lived with so many questions and obstacles to the unfolding of our Bethany community in prison and its offshoot, the lay Dominican chapter; we have lived these questions and have grown into some truly astonishing answers. And so, we continue to try to respond in truth and love to God’s gifts and challenges and to trust in God’s loving Providence as we walk this sacred path.

The journey continues . . .

Raichle, who was instrumental in every aspect of the founding of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter, reflects on the Provincial Council meeting and the monumental moment when her dream to form a Lay Dominican Chapter inside Norfolk prison was realized:

It was a beautiful spring afternoon that day in April of 1999 in Washington, DC. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom, a sign of hope of what was to come.

As Kathleen [Denevan] and I searched for the room where the Lay Provincial Council was being held, I remember feeling like a donkey carrying the GOOD NEWS of our brothers at Norfolk Prison.

We sat around a long table and began to present our request. I sensed that we were perceived with caution, but isn’t it a tendency for all of us to fear what we don’t know? So we tried to put a face on our brothers behind the wall … a face on those who have been rejected by society… a face on those who to so many may seem hopeless.

We gave witness to the power of God’s love, a love that can profoundly transform and change lives. We brought letters from members of our Bethany Catholic Community in prison expressing their desire to be a part of this Dominican family. We answered questions, some asked out of curiosity, other questions out of fear, and many just seeking to know concretely how a Dominican Lay Chapter can function inside a prison.

Then we were asked to leave the room so that the Provincial Council could take a vote on the proposal. We waited outside the room for about 45 minutes, which to me seemed like eternity. When they finished their deliberations Laurie [Biszko] came out and asked us to come back in. The vote was unanimous…. We were given the permission to begin a Pro Chapter of the Dominican Laity of the Province of St. Joseph at Norfolk State Prison.

It is difficult to explain how I felt. It was a Kairos moment; one that I will never forget.

Like Père Lataste, Fr. Radcliffe, the former Master of the Order, preached mercy and compassion by example. He immediately accepted the prisoners at Norfolk prison as his brothers in Christ and spoke of them often in his travels. As Father Radcliffe reflects on this journey, he writes to the members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter about his visit to the prison and his hope for the future, a hope that echoes the vision of Père Lataste:
One of the most memorable days of my life was when I was welcomed by my brothers and sisters of the Our Lady of Mercy Chapter in a prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, on July 29th 2001. Having got through all the security, my first impression was of coming home. I had been in touch with members of the fraternity, but this was my first meeting, but I felt as if I was with people who had been my friends for years. And this is a sign of how truly Dominican is the fraternity, because I have had this feeling where ever I have gone around the world, visiting Dominican communities.

In the prison you, our brothers, suffer from many restrictions, but we all live in smaller or larger prisons. At least you know it and confront the reality of imprisonment with courage and hope. Sometimes the worst prisons are those of which we are not even aware, prisons of prejudice, prisons of despair, prisons of fear. And so this fraternity has a message for all of us. We are all invited to find an inner freedom and throw down the barriers that separate us from each other. I think that you have a message of hope not just for those who face years of confinement. Our brothers of Norfolk invite us all to grasp the freedom which is in Christ.

We celebrated a beautiful liturgy with wonderful music. Music often speaks the dreams for which we cannot find words. It enables us to meet in places, which are given by God. Anne Lamott describes how music helped a woman to overcome her fear and embrace a man who was suffering from AIDS. She wrote, “Maybe it is because music is as physical as it gets; your essential rhythm is your heartbeat; your essential sound the breath. We’re walking temples of noise, and when you add tender hearts to this mix, it somehow lets us meet in places we couldn’t get to any other way.” The music we sang together gave us a taste of the freedom of Christ, in whom there are no barriers.

I was overwhelmed with presents, both for myself and for the General Chapter that was taking place at that time. I received gifts that I still have, and which remind me every day of my brothers and sisters of the Fraternity. I can read your names on the paper cross. This creativity is another preaching of the gospel. It shows that even if one’s resources are limited, we can still make signs that speak of God’s beauty. All of our lives are marked by ugliness and failure. But God’s grace can make something of beauty of who we are. His grace is creative in our lives.

One of the highlights of the General Chapter was when I returned with all the paper roses that you made. The members of the Chapter were visibly moved. It meant that you were present with us for the rest of the Chapter, and we felt supported by your prayers as you were by ours.

So I am proud that the Our Lady of Mercy Chapter is part of our family. I am sure that life is often very hard in prison for you all, but you are a light of hope there. Pray for us. If ever I find myself in a hard place, I will bear it more easily knowing that you are there, and this is something that we share. I hope that new Dominican fraternities will spring up in other prisons and be signs of hope all over the land.

There were so many others involved in the erection of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter that it would take a whole book unto itself to print their reflections. Their absence, however, makes them no less important or loved by the members of the Chapter for all they have done.

It is said of Père Lataste, that he lived his life loving those that others would repel. He preached mercy and compassion, but taught this more by example. To the prisoners of the Bethany-Norfolk...
community, this sentiment also holds the truth when they add Raichle and Sr. Denevan’s names with that of Père Lataste’s. Inspired by Père Lataste’s vision, the small seed planted by Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., and Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., in the abyss of a prison full of lost souls may have struggled to survive early on, but it has since grown into a vigorous vine with many emerging branches laden with much fruit.
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B. A Day in the Life of a Prison Lay Dominican

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APPENDIX A

Structure of Government

Master of the Order
Carlos A. Aspiroz Costa, O.P. (2001-present)

Promoter General
David Kammler, O.P. (2007-present)

Province of St. Joseph

Prior Provincial
David Dominic Izzo, O.P. (2002-present)

Provincial Promoter
Juan-Diego Brunetta, O.P. (2007-present)

Provincial Council President
Dorothy Murphy, O.P.L. (2002-present)

Regional Council President
Raymond Biszko, O.P.L. (2005-present)

Our Lady of Mercy

Chapter President
APPENDIX B

A Day in the Life of a Prison Lay Dominican

Not many people get to see the inside of a prison. Those who have know that it is not the most enjoyable place to be. Yet, the prisoners of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter have made MCI Norfolk a place of joy in their lives, a life based on prayer and contemplation. The prisoners’ lives are similar to that of the lives of cloistered religious who have voluntarily chosen to be shut in by walls.

In the article, “Norfolk inmates seek Christ in Lay Dominican chapter,” journalist Christine Williams described what she encountered on her visit: “They wake each morning to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and chant it again before they go to sleep. They pray the rosary, spend time in contemplative prayer and gather each Sunday to discuss the Gospel. In almost every way they are like the members of the other chapters of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic, except they are incarcerated.”

An added portrayal of the men’s lives would be that each will pray The Liturgy of the Hours between two to five times per day. Some will spend time in contemplative prayer, some in imaginative prayer, and others in their own way of making themselves present to God. While each prisoner has his own daily schedule, the one common denominator is that each one’s routine is centered in prayer. This is the heart of their life, and it cannot be affected by the little ups and downs of the every day frictions that inevitably occur within the prison environment.

As a community, each Sunday, the members come together for prayer, formation sessions, discussion, and often a presentation or teaching by an outside guest. One Sunday per month a Mass is celebrated by the Chapter’s Religious Assistant or a guest priest. The members also attend several other Masses which are celebrated in the prison—the Bethany-Norfolk community has a weekly Mass in English celebrated on Monday nights, a bilingual Mass in Spanish and English is celebrated on Sundays, and there is an Asian Mass that is usually in Vietnamese or English, celebrated on the fourth Saturday of each month. At the time of this writing, there was a course on Moral Theology
being taught one evening per month and another evening per month was set aside for the Chapter’s committees to meet, of which there have been several.

Various forms of artistic abilities abound in the chapter. For the musically inclined, the Chapter has its own choir and band, the “Echoes of Truth.” There is also a dance troop whose members study Liturgical dance and perform it at many of Bethany-Norfolk community’s events.

Many of the Chapter’s members are writers and artists who paint, draw, and fashion roses out of paper. Although the members could not attend themselves, in July 2004, eight members sent pieces of their artwork for display at the Dominican Institute for the Arts’ 8th Annual conference in Racine, Washington. As noted, in the DIA Newsletter:

An exception to the rule has been made. The rule is that exhibitors should be physically present at the Gathering. One group of Lay Dominican artists, however, could not be present because they are incarcerated in Massachusetts’ Prisons. The Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter members include men who do drawing, painting, soap carving, pottery, origami, and music. An exhibit of their work was a welcome addition to the Gathering, especially considering that their artistic supplies are of limited variety. For example, origami roses are cut with toenail clippers.

At the exhibit, some paper was left on the Chapter’s exhibit table so that the attendees could write a note to the incarcerated artists. In August, the Chapter received fourteen pages of praise and support! Examples include, Sister Jeanne Stickling, O.P., who wrote, “The exhibit of your creations are proof of your commitment to praising our Creator,” while Patricia Daly, O.P.L., the Vice President of the Dominican Institute for the Arts, expressed her feelings in: “Your work is inspiring, soulful and calls us to truly think! God is working in a special way through you and your art.” In addition to the activities of the Chapter, the members participate in the functions of the Bethany-Norfolk community (e.g., Lectio Divina, Scripture study, Cursillo, Walk for Hunger, etc.) and the prison (i.e., educational, rehabilitational, and sports oriented programs). Many of the men also expand their religious studies through correspondence courses such as those offered by Catholic Home Study Service and the Catholic Distance University. Perhaps the most important thing these men do on a daily basis is being “a word of hope” to the other men in prison.
APPENDIX C

Starting a Prison Chapter

Our Lady of Mercy Chapter receives numerous inquiries on how to start a chapter in a prison. Dominicans have been active in prison ministry since the Order’s earliest days. In France, Père Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., was a visionary in prisoner rehabilitation. In the book, Fr. Fenwick’s “Little American Province,” Father John Vidmar, O.P., notes that in the United States, “Dominicans in the province [of St. Joseph] have served as prison chaplains since 1887, principally at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, Ohio, but also at the District of Columbia jail complex in Lorton, Virginia.” At MCI Norfolk, Dominican religious had ministered to the prisoners long before Our Lady of Mercy Chapter came into existence. A Word of Hope tells the story of the steps taken, the successes, and the trials and tribulations encountered in establishing Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. Since what works in one prison, in one archdiocese, in one province, may not be the answer for how to start a chapter at another prison, it is our hope that this story will act as a guide for you as you begin your journey.

There is no magic formula on how to begin, only a deep desire by all those involved to get closer to God. It is the belief in the vision of Père Lataste. The members’ best advice is that you first need to plant the seed, Dominican Spirituality. Fertilize it with the Divine Office and the Holy Rosary. Water the vine that grows with constant prayer. But, most of all, leave it in God’s hands and let Him guide you. Only then will you produce the good fruit that you seek.

The members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter are available to offer you guidance, to unite with you in prayer as you begin your journey, but most of all, to be a word of hope to you. You may contact Our Lady of Mercy Chapter at the following address:

Our Lady of Mercy Chapter
c/o Catholic Chaplain’s Office
MCI Norfolk
PO Box 43
Norfolk, MA 02056-0043
United States
E-mail: ourladyofmercyop@aol.com
APPENDIX D

Publications by Our Lady of Mercy Chapter’s Members


---. “Arrested.” In The Map of Life, 10.


---. “DSS.” In The Map of Life, 13.


---. “God in Prison.” In Justitia, 28.
---. “Jim.” In Justitia, 21.

---. “Labyrinth of Life.” In The Map of Life, 7.

---. “Martha and Mary.” In The Map of Life, 9.


---. “Prison Tattoos.” In Justitia, 14.

---. “Seasons to the Runaway.” In Justitia, 25.

---. “Spiritual Direction.” In The Pillars, 73.

---. “The Suitcase Man.” In Justitia, 29.

---. “Terse.” In The Pillars, 81.

---. “Under Penalty of Law This Tag Not To Be Removed.” In Justitia, 32.

---. “Waiting at the Gatehouse.” In The Map of Life, 17.


---. “Mark 9*9*06.” In The Map of Life, 33.

---. “The Questioning Soul.” In The Map of Life, 35.

---. “My Place.” In Justitia, 40.


APPENDIX E

Further Reading: Works Containing References to Our Lady of Mercy Chapter


CHRONOLOGY

1822  Anne-Victorine Berthier (who will be the superior of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany) was born in Tours, France.

1832  Alcide Vital Lataste (the future founder of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany) was born in Cadillac-sur-Garrone, France.

1843  Anne-Victorine began her novitiate with the Sisters of the Presentation at Tours and received the name Sister Bernardine.

1857  Alcide Lataste began his novitiate with the Dominican Order of Preachers and received the name Marie-Jean-Joseph.

1859  Jean-Joseph Lataste was admitted to simple profession in Toulouse, France.

1860  Jean-Joseph Lataste was given his minor orders in Aix, France.

1862  Jean-Joseph Lataste made his solemn profession.

1863  Priestly ordination of Père Lataste in Marseilles, France.

1864  Père Lataste gave his first retreat at the women’s prison in Cadillac, France.

1865  Père Lataste gave his second retreat at the women’s prison in Cadillac, France.

1866  Sister Bernardine left the Congregation of the Presentation and received the name Sister Henri-Dominique in the Dominican Order.

1866  Père Lataste’s Les Réhabilitées was published.

1866  Foundation of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany at Frasnes-le-Château, France, established.

1869  Père Lataste, aged thirty-six, died at Frasnes, France.

1870  Transfer of the Mother House from Frasnes to Montferrand-le-Château, France.

1907  Death of Mère Henri-Dominique.
1960 The Sisters of Bethany opened a foundation in Millis, Massachusetts.

1985 A men’s community of Bethany, independent from the Sisters of Bethany, was established in Palmer, Massachusetts.

1987 Inspired by Père Lataste, the Community of New Bethany, independent from the Sisters of Bethany, was established at the women’s prison in Framingham, Massachusetts.

1988 Ruth Raichle, a former member of the Sisters of Bethany, joined the chaplaincy team at the men’s prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts.

1989 Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., joined Ruth Raichle at the men’s prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts.

1992 In the spirit of Père Lataste, Ruth Raichle and Sr. Kathleen Denevan form Bethany House Ministries, independent of the Sisters of Bethany.

1997 The Catholic community at the men’s prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, was officially named Bethany-Norfolk.

1999 Inspired by Père Lataste, a Lay Dominican Fraternity, Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter was formed at the men’s prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts.

2004 In the spirit of Père Lataste, Hope of Bethany Pro-Chapter was formed in Sherborn, Massachusetts, for the men and women leaving the Massachusetts prison system as well as others on the outside.

2005 The Fraternity of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter was erected at the men’s prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts.
ENDNOTES

Foreword


Prologue


2 Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste, O.P., Les Réhabilitées, 2nd ed., (Paris, France: V. Poussielgue-Rusand et Fils, 1866), English translation by Joan Weber, 20; The theological teaching at the time Père Lataste wrote Les Réhabilitées was that Mary of Bethany was Mary Magdalene. Since that time, however, theologians have come to believe that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are two distinct persons.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Ibid., 22.

5 Ibid.

Beginnings

1 The basic text owes much to the Chronicles and the Archives of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter, MCI Norfolk, Norfolk, MA.


Planting the Seed

1 The Prior Provincial, Reverend Norman Alfred Haddad, O.P., was the same Fr. Haddad who had previously ministered to the men at MCI Norfolk and who had officially named the Catholic community there, “Bethany-Norfolk.” Because many of the people in various offices changed during the period of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter’s formation, a guide as to who held which office at any given time is provided in Appendix A, Structure of Government.


Originally, Lay Dominicans were part of the Third Order of St. Dominic. The term “First Order” referred to religious priests and brothers. “Second Order,” cloistered nuns, and “Third Order,” all the rest. In 1974, a General Chapter of the Order deleted the terms “First,” “Second,” and “Third,” as designating various divisions within the Dominican family. To implement these directions, the International Congress of the Lay Dominicans met in Montreal and after several years, in 1987, the product of that Congress, the Rule of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic was approved by the Holy See. Between 1987 to 2004, established Lay entities began the process of de-Third Ordering themselves, however, in the Province of St. Joseph, Third Order remained in usage. Finally, in 2005, in response to the Acts of the General Chapter of the Friars of the Province of St. Joseph, the Master of the Order specifically directed that this term not be used. Related to this terminology are the religious suffixes O.P.L., T.O.P., and T.O.P.L. which appear to have come into existence in the Province in the late 1950s. Lay Dominicans have used all of these suffixes interchangeably throughout the years. However, since the term Third Order has been eliminated, one can no longer use the T.O.P. and T.O.P.L. suffixes. The current preferred suffix is O.P. with a prefix of Mr., Mrs., Dr., etc. In April 2007, this preferred suffix was accepted and approved by the Provincial Council of the Province of St. Joseph. Because Our Lady of Mercy Chapter was established during this time of changeover, all of these various terminologies were used at one time or another. A Word of Hope strives to use the current terminology except in cases where past events dictate that the terminology of the time be used or when the term is included in a quote. For text readability, however, the author has chosen to use the O.P.L. suffix when referring to a member of the Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic.


The Struggle for Survival


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.
A Word of Hope


A Chapter is Born


Laurie Anne Biszko, O.P.L., letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, 9 May 1999.

Ibid.

William F. X. Kane, e-mail to Ruth Raichle and Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., 27 June 1999.

Ibid.

Ruth Raichle and Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., proposal to the Archdiocese of Boston, 12 July 1999.


Ibid.


William F. X. Kane, e-mail to Ruth Raichle and Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., 17 September 1999.

Chrys Finn, O.P., letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, 22 September 1999.

Commitment to Saint Dominic

Domenicane di Betania, letter to Ruth Raichle, 21 September 1999.

Chrys Finn, O.P., letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, 18 October 1999.


A Word of Hope


3 Today, Our Lady of Mercy Chapter’s library is well utilized by all of its members. As of this writing, the library contained 198 volumes (127 titles) as well as numerous newsletters, articles, and printouts from the Internet (the prisoners do not have the ability to access the internet directly). The members also utilize Bethany-Norfolk’s library, which contains 943 volumes, including 132 reference books. In addition, the members have access to the prison’s general library.

4 His Eminence Bernard Francis Cardinal Law, letter to Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., 8 September 2000.

5 Ibid.

6 Domenicane di Betania, letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, Advent 2000.


9 Norman Haddad, O.P., Letter of Appointment, 1 November 2000; Chronicles II, 74.

10 The following year Fr. Cavalier was elected Prior for the Southern Conference. He accepted his election on 21 October 2001. Subsequently, Father Frank Sutman, O.P., took over as the Pro-Chapter’s Spiritual Director. Fr Sutman’s stay was followed briefly by Father Louis Roy, O.P. Then, on 19 February 2006, Fr. Cavalier was re-appointed Spiritual Director of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter.


13 Philip McShane, O.P., letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, 10 August 2001.

14 Carlos is the current Master of the Order, The Very Reverend Carolus Alphonsus Aspiroz Costa, O.P.

15 Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., letter to Our Lady of Mercy Pro-Chapter, 5 August 2001.


Chapter Recognition


4 While enflesh is not an actual word in the English language, the members feel that it embodies the essence of their apostolate. A dictionary entry could appear as: **en·flesh** (ěn-flĕsh) *tr.v.* **-flesh·ed, -flesh·ing, -flesh·es** 1. To incarnate. 2. To give substance or reality to.

The Chapter Today

1 Faith D. Flaherty, O.P.L., was officially accepted into Our Lady of Mercy Chapter on 9 January 2005 and made her Perpetual Profession in October 2005.


6 For insight into the life of a member of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter see Appendix B, A Day in the Life of a Prison Lay Dominican.


8 Our Lady of Mercy Chapter has received many inquiries concerning starting chapters in other prisons including those from: other prison chaplains in Massachusetts; Barcelona, Spain (Elias Kastner, O.P., e-mail to Norman Haddad, O.P., 28 May 2002); Pennsylvania (Michele Fitzgerald, O.P.L., e-mail to Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., 2005); Province of St. Albert the Great (James Motl, O.P., e-mail to Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., 2005); Kentucky (Bernard G. Dupont, O.P., letter to Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., 25 November 2005); California (David R. Cooper, letter to Ruth Raichle, O.P.L., 6 January 2007). See Appendix C, Starting a Prison Chapter, for additional information.

9 The Third Order of St. Dominic Congress was held on 9-12 June 2005 at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Raichle’s presentation was on the afternoon of 11 June.


Behind the Scenes

1 Sister Kathleen Denevan, O.S.F., personal reflection, 9 July 2007.

APPENDIX A  Structure of Government

1 Only those officers since the foundation of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter are listed.

2 Raichle was Acting Moderator during the Chapter’s initial formation (1999-2004).

APPENDIX B  A Day in the Life of a Prison Lay Dominican


2 For an example of some articles written by members see Appendix D, Publications by Our Lady of Mercy Chapter’s members.


5 Patricia Daly, O.P.I., note to Our Lady of Mercy Chapter, 2 August 2004.

6 Since 1989, the prisoners at MCI Norfolk have raised money for Project Bread by participating in their Walk for Hunger. Because they participate by walking the track behind the prison walls, it has been dubbed in the media, the “Hidden Walk.” In 2006, 248 prisoners participated walking 2,168 miles and, in 2007, on a rain filled Sunday, 234 prisoners participated logging 2,138 miles.

APPENDIX C  Starting a Prison Chapter


APPENDIX D  Publications by Our Lady of Mercy Chapter’s Members

1 Although some members of Our Lady of Mercy Chapter have published works pre- and post-reception into the Dominican Laity, this list contains only those works which were published post-reception and which relate to their Dominican walk.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis J. Beldotti is a Lay Dominican in Our Lady of Mercy Chapter. A retired computer executive, he made his Perpetual Profession in September 2006 and currently serves as the Chapter’s Formation Director. He holds a B.S. in Computer Science and Physics, and a M.L.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Boston University. He can be contacted at P.O. Box 43, Norfolk, MA 02056 or by e-mail at: dennis.beldotti@alum.bu.edu.