

Sister Mary Ignatia (1889-1966)



Born Della Mary Gavin in 1889 in Ireland, Sister Ignatia worked with Dr. Bob to help admit alcoholics into St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio, starting in 1939. She surmounted obstacles to personally care for thousands of alcoholics over the next several decades, both in Akron and later at St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland. Beloved by all who were associated with or helped by her, she was commonly referred to as the “Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Originally a musician, Sister Ignatia was transferred by her order, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Augustine, to St. Thomas Hospital in Akron to work in their admissions office. It was in that capacity that she first met and worked with Dr. Bob. In an interview with Bill Wilson, Sister regaled the co-founder with cherished recollections of Dr. Bob and their work with drunks at St. Thomas:

“Dr. Bob was the essence of professional dignity. He had a fine sense of humor and exceptional vocabulary.... Now, as I look back over the years, I realize that Dr. Bob was slowly but surely preparing me for the great project he had in mind. We often discussed the problem of alcoholism and the tragedies caused by excessive drinking. The individual given to alcoholic addiction is frequently a wreck of humanity – broken in body and soul, and heart and unable to help himself. His loved ones suffer, too; there were many broken homes and hearts because of compulsive drinking.”
(Recording of Sister Ignatia, 1954)

Her work in helping alcoholics was done with much dignity and modest distinction. In December 1949, she was presented with the Poverello Medal of the College of Steubenville. The medal was given to her for the A.A. Fellowship for her untiring efforts with alcoholics in Akron. In March 1961, Sister Ignatia received a letter of acknowledgment for her pioneering contributions from the White House (President Kennedy), which she shared with Bill Wilson. The letter read:

Dear Sister Mary Ignatia:

Through an admirer of yours, the President has learned of the fine work you have done in the past at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, and, more recently, at St. Vincent's in Cleveland.

He has been informed that a large number of citizens have been restored to useful citizenship as a result of your efforts. As you have been a strong influence for the good to many people, you have added strength to your community and nation.

In response to receiving a copy of the President’s letter, Bill responded to Sister Ignatia and wrote:

We have read the marvelous letter which President Kennedy requested be sent to you. It reminds me that I have no words to tell of my devotion and my gratitude to you, of the constant inspiration you have given me and so many over the years by your example of the finest in all that is spiritual and eternal, as well as temporal.

Following Dr. Bob's death in 1950, Sister Ignatia continued her work at St. Thomas. Then in 1952, she was transferred to St. Vincent Charity Hospital at Cleveland, where she was placed in charge of its alcoholic ward. Upon arrival, the ward at "Charity" was part of a dilapidated wing and was in great need of rejuvenation. Through the Sister's urging and much assistance from A.A. members with carpentry skills, the ward was soon transformed and named Rosary Hall Solarium.

Sister Ignatia provided each patient who left her care with a Sacred Heart badge. Receiving this item was accompanied by a personal promise to the Sister that the patient would return the badge before they drank again.

She died in Richfield Ohio, at age 77, on April 1, 1966. There were reportedly about 3,000 people present at the funeral, including A.A.'s co-founder, Bill Wilson.

