

Necedah Group Leader Dies; No Church Burial

Necedah, Wis. (NC) — Mary Ann Van Hoof Hirt, 74, whose claims of seeing the Virgin Mary and receiving revelations from her were condemned by the Church, died March 18 after a long illness.

A graveside service and

burial, led by a minister in her community of followers, was to be held March 21 on the grounds of the shrine at Necedah which she founded in 1950 after she said she saw her first vision.

Her claims brought thousands of pilgrims to

Necedah and led to an interdiction by the bishop of LaCrosse, the diocese in which Necedah is located.

The Necedah group severed its ties with the Catholic Church in 1979 when it accepted a schismatic archbishop as its leader.

A report by a Milwaukee newspaper that services for Mrs. Hirt would be held at St. Joseph Church in nearby Adams, Wis., brought a statement from the LaCrosse Diocese that no ecclesial burial was granted and no funeral Mass was to be celebrated.

Father Angelo Comoretto, pastor of the Adams parish, said March 20 that members of Mrs. Hirt's group had asked him in February to celebrate four Masses, including one for Mrs. Hirt's recovery.

Father Comoretto said he had originally scheduled the Mass for Mrs. Hirt's recovery for March 23, but that it has been canceled.

It was on Good Friday, April 7, 1950, that Mary Ann Van Hoof, 39, a farmer's wife and mother of seven, alleged that her first vision of the mother of Christ occurred on their Necedah farm.

Mrs. Van Hoof later married Ray Hirt.

News of her claims spread and a number of pilgrims visited and prayed at the site of the alleged vision. Mrs. Hirt called the site the Shrine of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Mediatrix of Peace.

In 1955, after a five-year investigation, Bishop John Treacy of LaCrosse issued a decree of prohibition against public and private worship in connection with the shrine and declared that Mrs. Hirt's claims were false.

A special commission set up by Bishop F. W. Fieking of LaCrosse urged in 1971 that the apparitions be declared false and that the shrine be closed.

In 1975 Bishop Fieking placed Mrs. Hirt and six of her followers under personal interdict.

An interdict is a penalty aimed at bringing a person back into obedience of the Church. While not the same as excommunication, it denies the individual the reception of the sacraments until he or she seeks reconciliation through the sacrament of penance.

Mrs. Hirt claimed that in one of the visions Mary told her: "The enemy is powerful, ready to pounce upon you.

The cloud is getting close to the Americans, and when it comes, it will be too late to get on their knees."

She also said that Mary told her: "Save your country, not by trying to outwit your neighbors, or who can get the best car; only by who can do the most rosaries a day. So remember the rosary and the way of the cross. Pray!"

The 1971 commission report said that Mrs. Hirt's testimony contained contradictions and that her life gave no evidence of the spiritual impact that revelations and apparitions should have had.

The commission's three priests and two lay people also said that the content of the messages and instructions Mrs. Hirt claimed to receive manifested "a spirit antithetical to Christianity," such as questionable accusations against church and government leaders.

Despite the sanctions, the community of Mrs. Hirt's followers continued to function over the years and

spread news of her claims throughout the United States. A number of followers moved to Necedah; at one time the community grew to 500 before the 1979 severance of ties with the Church.

Father James Barney, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Necedah, said many of Mrs. Hirt's followers left her community on Palm Sunday in 1983.

"Their bishop, who called himself Father Di Benedetto, told the people in their church that day that their claims were false, and that they ought to return to the Catholic Church," Father Barney said.

Father Barney said some of Mrs. Hirt's followers moved back to their former homes and about 100 households returned to the Necedah parish.

"I've told the people who have returned not to look back and to be glad that they're no longer part of it," he said. "Most of them are happy now because they realize they've been mistaken."

Fr. Paul J. Cuddy



On the Right Side

Third World Living

Most of us know of the Third World as countries afflicted by material poverty: from droughts, crop failures, political corruption, mismanagement, economic inefficiency, civil wars and sundry other things which perpetuate material poverty.

We are familiar with Third World problems from the TV: the barrios in South America; Sally Struthers and her appeals for pitiful hungry and starving African children; the documentaries on Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity in India.

When Fathers Wohrab, Heisel and I went to Kenya, E. Africa, last January, we saw life in the Third World. Compared to many African countries, Kenya is affluent and politically stable.

The capital, Nairobi, compares with any thriving American city, with beautiful buildings, hotels, educational centers, commerce — with a large section wallowing in poverty. Neighboring Tanzania, which is socialist, is in deep economic troubles and its poverty increases.

One memory of the Third World poverty comes from our visit to Karaba Mission, about 20 miles from the city of Nukuru. This is Bush Country with a vengeance. We arrived at the mission, run by Italian Consolata Father Livio Senari, around ten o'clock. The mission is a solid cinder-block building, with several bedrooms, an office with typewriter, a meeting room, running water, the barest of furniture and mosquito netting over each bed.

On arriving we met the president of the parish council, who had just arrived for the council meeting. He had walked 20 miles from his home to attend the meeting! He is a former seminarian, about 30 years old, and is headmaster of an elementary school.

The mission compound is like a small plantation — growing bananas, cabbages, tomatoes, sugar cane, etc. Father Livio is a mechanic, farmer, teacher as well as priest. He had repaired an old generator for electricity; a solar heater which had been abandoned. He planted small trees both for future use and to teach the local

Kenians about forestry. He said, "We learned from the Jews in Israel to put plastic around the base of the little trees to preserve precious moisture. That holds for 30 days. Otherwise, they dry out in two."

The mission has 23 stations. As we drove over a road so rutted our stomachs gurgled, we saw Third World living. Scattered thatch huts, but no villages. A terrible lack of water for cows and humans. Huts without water, plumbing, electricity, refrigeration. Water is carried in pails.

Over each station is a native catechist who teaches religion, guides the baptized, prepares others for baptism, conducts services for his station people. The priest comes once a month for Mass, confessions and supervision. But miles and miles of flat, arid land is home to thousands. The "poverty level" so decried in the states would be considered suburban affluence.

We visited a second mission compound in the making, 20 miles from the Karaba Mission. The priest was shovelling to set a septic tank. The complex was built around a huge cistern which hopefully will catch water when it comes. It has rooms for the missionary, meeting rooms, offices and a dispensary.

Even though the place was not yet in operation, a group of native women were waiting patiently for bags of food. The mission had sacks of "bulgar" (wheat) and dried milk. We were proud to read on the sacks: "Gift from the people of the United States." The priest said simply, "They have no food, so they come here." There is a small clinic, a school, and miles and miles of arid desolation.

We returned to the mission at Karaba for lunch about 2 p.m. It was thoroughly unappetizing: boiled potatoes, scraps of chicken, tomatoes, cheese, bread and baby bananas. I contented myself with a cheese sandwich, baby bananas — and awful coffee.

We each made mental notes comparing our home parishes with Karaba, its two priests and 23 catechists, and blessed God that there were others to do the harsh work work of evangelization in the Bush; and determined to interest the world in the work of dedicated native bishops, priests, Sisters, Brothers and catechists — and dedicated missionaries.

'America' Editor To Head Fordham

New York (NC) — Jesuit Father Joseph A. O'Hare, editor in chief of America magazine, was elected president of Fordham University by the Jesuit college's board of trustees. The announcement was made March 14.

The 50-year-old New York native will become the 31st president of Fordham July 1.

He succeeds Jesuit Father James C. Finlay who will retire June 30 after completing a 12-year term as Fordham president. Father Finlay plans to take a year-long sabbatical, studying at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley Calif., followed by six months in Europe and the Middle East.

Father O'Hare began his

career as an educator and later became an award-winning journalist for America, the weekly Jesuit journal of opinion. He was named associate editor in 1972 and editor in chief in 1975.

A commentator and lecturer on contemporary religious, social and political issues, he writes columns on a wide range of subjects with a special interest in American and Philippine politics; civil rights, the modern papacy and war and peace.

He is a member of the board of the Catholic Press Association and of Georgetown University, Boston College and Xavier University.

Mercy Sisters Offer 'Ministry Experience'

The Sisters of Mercy have invited women interested in exploring the religious life to a weekend "Ministry Experience," April 13-14 at St. Ann's Convent in Hornell.

The program includes discussion with Mercy Sisters in various ministries in the area: rural ministry, parish and nursing home visitation; hospital ministry and nurse practitioner ministry. A tour of some of these ministries is part of the weekend.

The event is part of the community's monthly Faith Sharing Program, which provided women an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the call to religious life.

Anniversary

Dallas, Tex. — Richard Agnello, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Agnello of Webster, celebrated his 10th anniversary as a lector, at St. Monica's Church here.

Deadline

Deadline for news in the Courier-Journal is noon on Thursday, preceding Wednesday publication.

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