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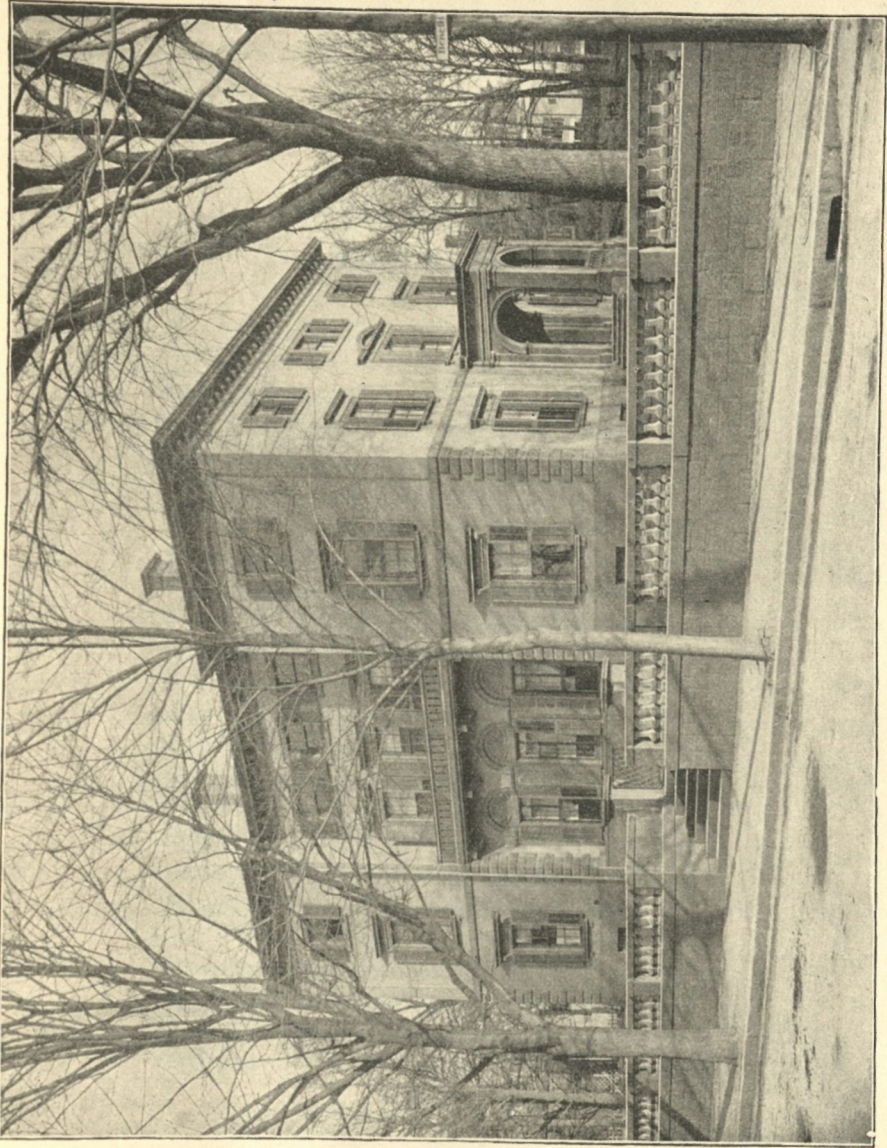
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Sisterhood of the
Holy Nativity

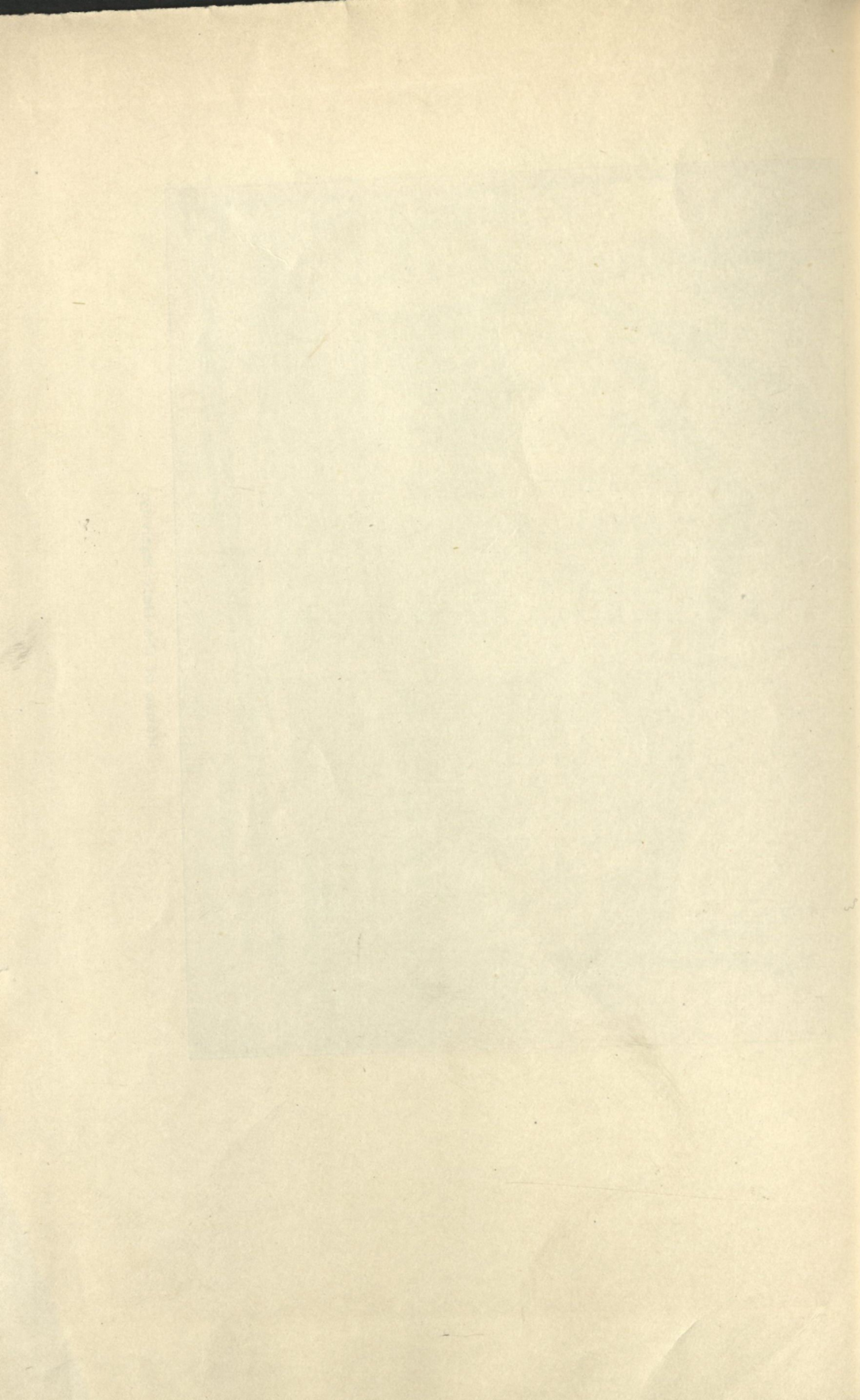


Providence,

R. I.



House of the Holy Nativity.



The Sisterhood of the Holy Nativity

IN the All Saints' season of 1882, a little company of "Religious," under the guidance of their chaplain, the Rev. C. C. Grafton, now the Bishop of Fond du Lac, was organized into a community which, as being especially consecrated to the Incarnation and its manifestation in the Birth at Bethlehem, took the name of the Holy Nativity. There seemed, at this time, a place in our Church for a Sisterhood which should embrace a somewhat different line of work from that which was already so fully and well done by others. The parochial clergy in many places were asking for the aid of Sisters, and it was impossible for the existing Sisterhoods to place local branches in so many places. The Church needed a missionary order which, by its rule, could be free to go from town to town and give temporary assistance in organizing and developing parish work, visiting, looking up the strayed and lapsed, instructing in the elements of the faith and preparing candidates for baptism and confirmation. Such

a work had been successfully done in France in the last century, by the holy Bishop Pavillon, whose devout evangelical spirit made him mistakenly regarded by some as a Jansenist. It was designed that this help given to the clergy should be furthered by having houses in large cities which could be supported by several parishes, thus enabling the Sisters to work in all. That the Sisterhood might be on the Church line of government, it is always under the Bishop of each diocese in which it labors, and its constitution and rule, after being approved by some theologians appointed for that purpose, were submitted to a number of the Bishops, and received their approval.

The first home of the Sisters was in Boston, near the Church of the Advent, of which their founder, the Rev. C. C. Grafton, was rector, and where they were employed in parish work, including the care of the Altars of the great church, with its constant and beautiful worship, the charge of various guilds and classes, and ministrations to the ignorant and poor and sick, as well as to the worldly rich, who are often truly needy. Some of the Sisters were engaged in ecclesiastical embroidery, which, like their other work, was wrought for the glory of God, since poor parishes were supplied with vestments at the mere cost of material ; even this, not infrequently, being a gift, and by this service a better ordered and more reverent worship was encouraged. The Sisterhood was faithful to its aim of spreading the knowledge of the Faith, by various

forms of spiritual almsgiving; a library of selected books of devotion and doctrine, which were freely lent and given, did an effective missionary work, taking its messages of truth from soul to soul, in city mansion and country home and frontier cabin, and winning lives to the kingdom of God; and the first of all services was continually rendered to man and to the Church by intercessory prayer, joining in the great force of intercession which our fathers believed maintained the very world in its place, and using for man's welfare the omnipotence of prayer—for, says a French Bishop: "Prayer equals the power of God."

In 1888, the community, being invited to establish itself in Rhode Island, removed to its present home in one of the stately old mansions of Providence. The great house, standing apart from the city's confusion, among its lofty sheltering trees, was speedily adapted to its new purpose; serene faces of saints and angels smiled down from the walls of the grand stairway, the sweet-voiced chapel-bell rang its seven times daily call to prayers, and the rooms once gay with worldly music resounded at each nightfall with the humble, joyful praise of the Magnificat. The chapel, though but temporary till the hoped-for day when the new Chapel of the Holy Nativity shall arise, is carefully fitted to its purpose, and the Altar is ever made most fair for the coming of His feet.

In the house moves on the active, yet quiet life of a religious community, the regular, tran-

quil labor, sustained and sanctified by continual prayer, the going out and in on errands of mercy, the work in the embroidery room and sacristy, the study and devotional reading and meditation, the service of the Hours and the continued intercession.

The community is entered by the usual steps of aspirant, postulant, and novice, with an additional degree, the junior-professed, which adds two years to the time of probation. The novices pursue a wisely-planned course of study in Bible and Prayer Book and Church history and doctrine, which is designed as a preparation for the mission teaching, the especial work of the community, and one which has been greatly blessed.

In Providence, the Sisterhood continues much of its former work, and has entered upon new activities; the demands upon the embroidery department are largely increased, and by economy in material and gifts made possible by the generosity of friends, many parishes hitherto unable to use vestments have been supplied, and some two hundred Altars have been furnished with linen or vestments. The preparing of Altar Breads, for which there is a constantly increasing demand, is also an important department of the Sisters' work.

Besides work in S. Stephen's parish, whose rector, Dr. Fiske, is their chaplain, the Sisters are engaged in several other city parishes, visiting, teaching Bible-classes, and in other ways assisting the clergy; hospital visiting, with its heart-to-heart ministrations, is an important la-

bor, and many are thus reached who in days of bodily vigor had no time to think of the soul's health. At Olneyville, near Providence, a large, earnest Bible-class and guild of factory girls are under the Sisters' care, and at Thornton, a village of English mill operatives, a growing mission has been established; this grew directly from the hospital work through which the Sisters first became acquainted with some of the Thornton people, who begged them to "come over and help." A barn was offered for the work, and by the aid of friends and by the Sisters' own gifts and labor, it was speedily fitted as a temporary chapel. The people gladly availed themselves of their new opportunity and, adding their hardly earned offerings to the contribution of the president of one of the mill corporations and to generous gifts sent by friends of the Sisters, they soon rejoiced in the erection of the neat building containing chapel and Sunday-school room, which is now the home of the Mission of the Holy Nativity, as the Thornton mission is named, begun as it was at Christmas time and in a stable.

On the pleasant seashore at Tiverton, R. I., is a House of Rest for teachers and others, given by a Boston lady, an associate of the Sisterhood, and directed by the Sisters. This home has for several years been a place of spiritual as well as of physical refreshment to the many to whom the Sisters have distributed with free hands gifts from their own inheritance of peace, and has, beside, been the starting-point of a mission which

was begun in its chapel and which has resulted in the establishment of the Church in the village. St. Helena's Rest for working girls and poor families has been established at Barrington by a Providence lady, and is wisely managed and mothered by the Sisters.

The Sisters are also settled in Cleveland, where they went in response to the invitation of the Bishop of Ohio, to take charge of a Home for Aged Women, and where there is opportunity for Bible classes and other work for the spreading of the Faith. In Philadelphia, the Sisters are doing Mission Work in the Parish of St. Timothy, Roxborough.

In the House of the Visitation in Fond du Lac are several Sisters who work in the cathedral parish, and in other city and outlying parishes, and who go on mission tours through northern Wisconsin, among the Oneida Indians and the lumbermen, and into many a wild, remote country place, visiting the people, teaching them, supplying books, holding informal meetings, opening Sunday-schools, and giving Bible talks to congregations gathered in some good woman's parlor, in a farmhouse kitchen or in the school-house; the people listening always with respect, and earnest desire to hear the message brought by the Sisters. These journeys combine with the more public ministrations much personal work, much cheer and instruction and gentle guidance, given to shut-in invalids, and souls in the shadow of ignorance; long-relapsed Christians are often led back to the "first

works." Nor is this work done by the mission Sisters alone, for they are constantly and consciously supported by the continual intercessions sent up for them by the community at home. The instruction given on the mission tours is made plain and simple, as befits the people's needs, and is based upon the Bible and Prayer Book teachings. The subjects of a recent tour include The Bible, The Church, The Elements of the Faith, Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Repentance, The Church Year, and the Devotional Use of the Bible. The mission Sisters live in the homes of the people, and everywhere win their esteem and confidence as they point the spiritually hungry to the Bread of Life, and the thirsty to the Living Waters, and show the stranger the way to his Father's house, and to them in prison the Truth which is able to make them free.

The Sisters are engaged in mission and parish work in various cities of the East and West, as they are called by the clergy, but the demand for their assistance is greater than can be met, and priests who would gladly use the services of Sisters should remember that they may help in finding and giving lives to be trained and consecrated and given back to serve the Church and the Master. In recent missions in Camden, N. J., and in Minneapolis, the Sisters have helped in preparing the people for hearty coöperation in the services, and have supplemented the work of the missionary by giving women's classes and instructions, and have lingered after

the close of the mission to establish the work, form guilds, and prepare persons for the reception of the Sacraments.

The literary labors of this community should be included in its useful works. "Vocation," written by the founder of the Sisterhood, has for some years been winning earnest souls to consider the call to the religious life. "Self-consecration," a graceful English version of a French book of devotion, was prepared at the suggestion of the Sisterhood, and dedicated to it. "Our Family Ways," by a Sister of the Community, is widely known and read; while "The New Creation," more recently published, is giving help to many by its simple, direct exposition of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

As in its works, so in its numbers, the community has had a steady and healthful growth and now has twenty-five members.

The mission tours and the homes under the Sisters' care have brought them into familiar contact with many and different persons, and the joyful unaffectedness of their living and ministrations, and the God-given grace of nature not repressed, but transformed by religion, have not failed to win in a peculiar degree the close confidence of those who have learned to know them, and false ideas concerning a Sister's life and work have been corrected in the minds of many by acquaintance with some Sister of the Holy Nativity; for the living results of a system, the characters formed by it, the sacrifices simply and gladly made, the entire consecration to God and

the manifestation of this in charity to His children, answer, as nothing else can, the questions often asked: Do religious orders meet with permanent success? Is their rule of life an inspiration and strength? Are such orders a faded relic of mediævalism, useless in our day, or are they a living growth, firmly rooted, indeed, in the past, but still spreading sheltering branches and blossoming into the "white flower of a blameless life" and yielding fruit of refreshment and healing? And the Sisters of the Holy Nativity are helping to demonstrate that the religious life is a life logical, serene, and free, a life of benevolence animated by piety, instinct with the love of one's neighbor, consecrated and inspired by the love of God, reconciling greatness of soul with humility, freedom of action with submission of will, and social life with solitude, a life in which strong natures are nourished, not quenched, and in which feebler natures find the regimen fitted to give greater vigor, a life of sweet uniformity and peaceful activity, a life of service to the world, and yet itself hidden in God.

The spirit of the founder and of the superior of this community breathe through the life of the Sisterhood in its loving harmony, joyful simplicity, gentle humility, befitting those consecrated to the perfect lowliness of the Holy Nativity, the intimate union of the active and contemplative lives, and the pursuit of the high calling to win souls to earnest devotion to the Incarnate Lord; and the Sisters of this community, remembering their consecration to Him who was

born at Bethlehem—that they may have gifts for those who come to them in the way, and may themselves grow into the likeness of Him they serve—are in their lives and prayers constantly seeking the Living Food in the spiritual Bethlehem, the House of Bread.

(From *The Churchman*, April 29, 1893.)

