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ALERT TOP STORY TOPICAL

Perpetual prayers continue a century after devastating St. Rose Convent fire in La Crosse

Caden Perry

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Sister Helen Elsbernd stands in the Mary of the Angels Chapel at the St. Rose Convent in La Crosse.
Saskia Hatvany, River Valley Media Group

Caden Perry

By 4 p.m. Dec. 2, 1923, the smoke above Market Street began to clear. Beneath the Sunday skies, the St. Rose Convent sat charred.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and passersby gathered to sift through what could be saved and what was lost. Boy Scouts left soaked from searching the flooded basements. Film photos are rushed around for development in the La Crosse Tribune offices and chapel archives. The perpetual prayer remains continuous.

Five hours earlier, a fire broke out in the main dormitory halls of the La Crosse building.

Then and now, the St. Rose Convent Fire 100 years later

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The fire claimed the top two floors of the convent in the 20 or so minutes before the fire brigade showed up. Sister Lidwina Canty was the only casualty of the 1923 fire. Her rosary is blackened, but intact. Saved from the fire, the attached chapel hosts sisters who conduct their perpetual prayers — ongoing since 1878 — through every day and night before and after the fire.

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The following Sunday, a sister put the events and pain onto paper.

“When saying our prayers there, these days it is difficult for us to realize that all around us is in ruin, that portion of our dear Convent Home erected through the many painful privations and heroic sacrifices of the earlier members of our community is now a heap of destruction,” one sister’s writings said.

On Friday morning, 100 years later, Sister Helen Elsbernd walked under the eyes of St. Michael to two large iron doors that lead into the chapel. When one door is closed, the hidden side is revealed to be much darker than the open face.

The Mary of the Angels Chapel was untouched in the historic blaze. It remains today as the spiritual heart of Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration around the world. A statue of St. Michael guards the corridor leading into the chapel. The statue stands 15 feet tall, watching over anything and anyone passing by.

“When Mother Antonio placed the statue, she told St. Michael to take care of the adoration chapel. This charge was performed faithfully at the time of the 1923 fire,” Jane Comeau reads from a plaque placed under St. Michael.



Sister Helen Elsbernd shows burn marks from the 1923 fire on the doors at the entrance of the Mary of the Angels Chapel, on Friday, Dec. 8.

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Jane Comeau peers at the statue of St. Michael at the entrance of the Mary of the Angels Chapel on Friday, Dec. 8. The fire stopped just short of the vestibule where St. Michael stood, sparing the chapel.

Saskia Hatvany

The fire stopped just before the iron doors, ahead of which the statue is positioned.

Sister Elsbernd's footsteps echo through the chapel walls with a new century behind them. She walks through the adoration chamber, a prayer hall where sisters stay in a rotation of continuous prayer for 16 hours every day. Not a word can be spoken inside the chamber. In the chapel Elsbernd explained some of the symbols within.

"On the main tabernacle, the symbols on the sides are the Greek letters alpha and omega," Elsbernd explains. "For us, it means the beginning and the end."



Spectacles, a rosary and pieces of ash found near the charred body of Sister M. Lidwina Canty lay on display at the St. Rose Convent in La Crosse on Friday, Dec. 8. The display was installed for the 100-year anniversary of the fire which killed Sister Lidwina and destroyed the West wing of the St. Rose Convent.

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The fire did not end the sister's way of life. The evening of the fire, the 135 sisters who lived in the convent began scrubbing floors and fixing kitchens, archivist Meg Paulino said. Within three years, the convent had been rebuilt.

A century of time in between, the "motherhouse" of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration is still used by members to live and serve out consecrated lives. Sister Thea Bowman of La Crosse, the first Black Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, is well underway to being canonized in Catholic sainthood. A stream of published books, local social justice work and hospitality to locals and more make the sisters' mission steady as it was more than 100 years ago.

St. Rose Convent, 100 years after the fire

St. Rose Convent Fire, 100 years later



Jane Comeau , communications director for Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, stands in the part of the St Rose Convent, which was destroyed in the 1923 fire.

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St. Rose Convent Fire, 100 years later



Sister Helen Elsbernd stands in the Mary of the Angels Chapel at the St. Rose Convent in La Crosse.

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St. Rose Convent Fire, 100 years later



Visitors read prayer intentions sent to the chapel from far and wide on Friday, Dec. 8.

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St. Rose Convent Fire, 100 years later



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