

Typically when thinking of Irish areas of our country, you probably would not think of Louisiana or New Orleans. But in the city, one of the most prominent statues is that erected in honor of an Irish Catholic woman who kept the spirits and hopes up of the city through some of its darkest days.

Margaret Gaffney, one of the millions who immigrated to the US from Ireland, came in the mid-19th century. Margaret, was just five; the tough journey tossed their ship on the Atlantic, and the ship ended up in Baltimore when it was supposed to be in Boston. Not long after their arrival, the dreaded yellow fever struck Baltimore in 1822. Both parents and the baby sister died within a short time of each other. Orphaned, she worked for a Protestant woman who allowed her to keep her faith, marrying a Catholic man, Charles, in her early 20s. Her husband in poor health, the doctors suggested that they move to New Orleans where the climate was warmer; they welcomed a daughter, but Charles died young in New Orleans, her daughter dying as an infant, leaving Margaret alone in a strange city.

Father Mullon, her priest, also an Irishman, helped to arrange for her funeral and burial and give her spiritual counsel. After the short funeral and burial, Father asked Margaret what she would do with herself. Being penniless, she knew she needed employment, but she had no skills to speak of, except the willingness to work hard. Before long Father Mullon introduced her to Sister Regis, whose Sisters of Charity had recently taken over care of the girl orphans at an orphanage. She and Sister clicked immediately, and Margaret offered herself to the sisters for room and board for the privilege of caring for the many little girls there. But she quickly saw so much more needed to be done. Money needed to be raised for a larger orphanage for the growing number of children to have a good life and learn the Catholic faith. Margaret sprang into action.

First on her list was to find a way to purchase two cows so that the children would have fresh milk every day. This was accomplished via a loan arranged by Father Mullon, the first of hundreds of loans that she would make and pay back. The cows arrived and she taught the girls two by two how to properly milk the animals. Next, they needed fresh vegetables and fruit and good meat. Margaret was a born schmoozer. She could flash a smile and have a joke with the merchants in the French Market (many of whom were Irish like herself) where farmers brought their crops from the farmlands up the Mississippi River, and return home with a wagon full of food of all kinds for her “dear little ones.” She became such a fixture in the commercial areas of the city and was so endearing to everyone, that her cart was always full on the return trip to the orphanage. Eventually, her milking herd grew to forty cows which she kept in a large barn some blocks from the orphanage. Margaret peddled milk all over that section of New Orleans. Her first “enterprise” had become a money-maker, all of the profits going to the needs of the children.

Soon she and the children — two at a time — began scouring the nearby blocks for an appropriate house that the sisters could own. On a walk, she spotted a run-down house with an equally run-down old man standing in the front door; the stereotypical crabby old

man. She asked if it was his house, and then went in and said I will make you the best cup of coffee in town!" She proceeded to tidy up the kitchen in the process of looking for the coffee and the sugar; she set up a fire to boil the water and in fifteen minutes the man had a steaming cup of sweet hot cafe noir with two thick slices of bread with strawberry jam on the side, all presented with a folded linen napkin and a proper spoon. Once he had tasted Margaret's coffee, he asked her to work for him! Of course, she politely refused and explained her mission. The old man turned out to be a Judge and a Catholic — non-practicing, but a Catholic. He lived with his son in a fine, newly-built house uptown. "Well, then you'll not be needin 'this house any more! Let the children come live here and we will fix it up. When we build our own brand new orphanage, you will have a fine renovated house to sell!"

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a lot of nerve, Miss Margaret?" the judge intoned.

Margaret's charm (and nerve) had won him over and he agreed to let the orphans have the house. The old house, known as "Old Withers" became the new Saint Patrick's Catholic Girls Orphanage with the determination of Margaret, prayers of the sisters, and hard work of the young men and ladies of Saint Patrick's Parish, who kept it running. Her charm and ability to get donations also kept it furnished. They moved to a larger one several years later through donations, Margaret, the nuns, and 109 orphans.

Soon, besides the orphanage, the sisters started a Catholic school for the parish children, with classes held in the orphanage building. It was not long before Saint Patrick School was erected as a separate structure nearby in the same square of land, and then a permanent church built in 1849 which still stands.

Her work though went well beyond the orphanage. People in the city would suffer from outbreaks of Yellow Fever due to it being a port city. Over the summer of 1853, an epidemic caused thousands to die, including 5 of the sisters. Miraculously, none of the children in the orphanage died, but their ranks swelled because so many had lost their parents to Yellow Jack. Margaret remained healthy although she, too, lent herself to the hospital to assist the sick and dying.

In 1859, Margaret had lent so much money to a baker who couldn't keep himself in business, that she was forced to buy him out or lose her investment. To complete the purchase she had to sell her milk business. Margaret never did anything in a small way. She decided that she would have the most up-to-date baking equipment available, the best recipes, and produce the best bread in New Orleans. She hired some of the teenagers from the older girls 'orphanage to sell the bakery goods. Her Sundays were spent going to Mass at Saint Teresa's and spending the day with the sisters and the children. No one was ever turned away from Margaret's bakery for lack of money, and during the Civil War, she fed Confederates and Union Army alike.

During the War, The economy ground to a halt with the Union Blockade, eventually the city becoming occupied. Food and supplies needed, Margaret again leapt into action.

Determined not to let the war inconvenience her charity work she demanded a meeting with the infamous General Benjamin Butler – known as ‘Butcher Butler’ among the ladies of New Orleans for the brutality of his rule.

Butler told Margaret she would face execution if she was caught trying to cross the strictly enforced lines of occupation. She told him that she did not believe it was the policy of President Abraham Lincoln to see the poor of New Orleans starve to death to which Butler replied, "You are not to go through the picket lines without my permission, is that clear?" "Quite clear," Margaret responded reluctantly.

Then, to her great surprise, Butler added, "You have my permission."

By then Margaret was regarded as something of a minor saint by the people of New Orleans and she used to sit in the door of her office where she had a smile for all who passed and a wise word of advice for the many who sought her help.

When she was 69 she became ill and died after several months of sickness. Her death made the front page of the local paper. A state funeral was ordered; the Mayor of New Orleans led the coffin, the Lieutenant Governor served as a pallbearer and the Archbishop was present. The pope even sent her a crucifix shortly before she died. The orphans of the city wore black and the city was so thronged with mourners they had difficulty maneuvering the coffin into the Cathedral for the requiem mass.

Margaret left every cent of her fortune to the city’s orphanages with no conditions attached as to whether they catered for Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, black or white children. To her, they were all in need.

Affixed to the end of the will was a simple cross – a reminder of her humble origins – for despite her huge wealth Margaret never learned to read. She died illiterate. A committee to erect a statue in her honor was swiftly assembled and the sum of \$6,000 was soon raised. A remarkable sum when only nickels and dimes were accepted for the project.

The sculpture shows her in her trademark bonnet, sitting in her doorway waiting for people to pass by and chat with her. Inscribed is the single word, ‘Margaret,’ so well-known was she that no further description was needed.

The park was later renamed Margaret Place and it still hosts what it thought to be the first-ever statue built in honor of a woman in all of the United States.

As we hear in the Gospel this week, “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” The context of the reading is Jesus speaking about his final entry into Jerusalem where He will meet his ultimate fate of crucifixion. His hour is coming. Jesus speaks of His hour now coming, but He looks at this not with fear but a determination: whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. This is what Margaret did, and

what we are all called to do. But the starting point is to never forget this is what God does for us.

As we hear in that first reading from Jeremiah, I will be your God and you will be my people. God through His love for us, gives us this promise of being one of us, fulfilled in the Son who offers Himself as the sacrifice for us all. This is the Lamb of God that we receive at each Mass; and why it's so important we are at Mass to be with the Lord, and to be fed by Him. Jesus invites us to be healed by Him, but also that challenge - to follow Him. And the paradox is it is often through suffering that we bring hope and mercy into the world; Jesus of course suffering for us all, but by letting go and letting God, and willing to do anything for Him and the world. The law of loving God and neighbor becomes something internal and part of us.

Understanding God does this for us out of love, we then ask ourselves OK God, what do you want me to do. Lent and hopefully our entire spiritual journey is one of the grain of wheat dying so to speak; our hearts being changed and shaped and molded by God, so we can come to love Him and others at a deeper level.

As we do this, we then bring others to Jesus Christ just as Margaret did. Note Margaret throughout her work cared for all people regardless of status, northern, southern, Protestant, Jewish or Catholic. And note in the Gospel Greeks arrive and want to see Jesus, meaning his message is spreading; Paul will be called to bring the Gospel to them eventually. But Paul, the other apostles and so many will suffer in doing this after the resurrection. A hard pill to swallow is that line about "hating our life in this world," because if we are going to follow Him, we have to follow Him to the cross; there are no detours around Good Friday. Suffering isn't something we seek out just for suffering sake. But how often we can do all we can to avoid difficult things; the suffering of having to own up to mistakes or go through treatment; the suffering of a difficult conversation with someone; the suffering of hard work and study; whatever it might be. But suffering is an important part of growth. When I was a child I thought like a child but then I became a man and put away childish thoughts Paul will tell us. What we find is that through the suffering we endure for others, the things we do out of love, we bring hope and comfort when we are patient, when we listen, when we give of our time, when we care, when we challenge out of love. So often, it's a way we grow in holiness. But we are not doing it alone. Nourished by the Bread of Life, we help people find comfort and peace and hope. The question we need to ask ourselves as we receive Communion is do we become who it is we receive?

As you can tell our crosses are covered as we begin the period called "Passiontide," which is meant to help us think more deeply about the Cross. What it reminds us of is the greatest love story ever told - of a God who is in the trenches with us, and shows us how deeply we are loved. But if we are going to reveal that love to the world, it takes work. Margaret's life was one of constant sacrifice and much suffering, but by all accounts one of incredible joy as she helped people, developed friendships, and gave a city hope that brought people from all walks of life together. May we do the same as we gather around the altar with grains of wheat and grapes that have been died and been

transformed into wine. This bread and wine will become for us the bread of life and our spiritual drink. So we too must die to ourselves and be transformed by God's mercy, compassion and steadfast love so that like Margaret, we can bring others to Jesus Christ. The journey might not be easy, but with us every step of the way is our Lord. So let us say "yes" to following Him, and let His love shine through us as we come to Jesus and stay with Him, eat his body, bring His law inside of our bodies to love God and one another, and reveal that through our acts of love and mercy.