

First Anniversary of Fire
October 13, 2017

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under the sun.

At times it is hard for me and perhaps for you to realize that we've moved through four seasons since the events of Wednesday, October 12, 2016.

Tuesday the 11th was generally speaking, just another Fall day here on the Hudson River. Little did we know that in a few short hours, our lives would be turned upside down and inside out. Perhaps some of us went to bed that night thinking of the day to come, early morning mass followed by a cup of hot coffee and a hot bacon and egg breakfast, our traditional Wednesday routine.

Wednesday dawned bright and beautiful and unseasonably warm for October. People were stirring, the different shifts were greeting one another - nurses giving reports - kitchen staff preparing the much anticipated breakfast fare. But at 7:04 the alarm was raised and we were literally thrown out of our usual routines, which we so often took for granted.

The screams of fire and "get everyone out" could be heard throughout the infirmary and the main building. We knew, just by the smell and darkening smoke that this was not a false alarm, this was not burnt toast or even bacon. This was real!

Within a matter of minutes our staff: nurses, aides, cooks, dishwashers, maintenance workers had the buildings evacuated. Infirmary sisters literally still in their beds, wrapped up in blankets and afghans, covered like little children heading out to the play in the autumn air, were out the doors and on their way over to the gym in St. Peter's.

Everyone safely accounted for. People double checking to make sure no-one was left behind. Nurses wheeling out medical carts and medical charts.

As we were busy about getting everyone safely in St. Peter's, our police and fire departments were already the scene. As the seriousness of the situation was evaluated, police and fire departments from the surrounding area rushed to the scene.

Helicopters buzzed overhead, news teams from every station gathered out on Hudson Terrace. Employees not even scheduled to work that day, rushed to the

scene and literally fought their way through the police blockades preventing anyone from getting in.

The first responders did what they did best; teams of ambulances, schools buses, transportation vehicles arrived on the scene. Medical teams from Holy Name Hospital and Englewood Hospital swarmed into St. Peters and every resident of SMV was examined and evaluated.

About 9 a.m. or so, our police chief Mike Cioffi, realized the sisters had not had any food that morning and within minutes, bagels, cereals, milk, coffee, orange juice appeared out of nowhere! Sr. Bridget along with Sandy started making calls and by 12:30 that same day all the residents of SMV were on their ways to their temporary homes, many thinking, we'll be back home in a few days. That would not be the case.

By 10:30 or so the fire was officially contained. We would not know until a few days later exactly how extensive the damage to the main building would be. Sisters literally left here with the clothes or nightgowns and slippers on their feet and not much else.

It would be heartbreaking over the next several months as we all saw our belongings thrown out the windows and carried away. Family pictures, treasures and keepsakes, most, if not all — gone.

BUT WE WERE STILL HERE and that's what really mattered.

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As the days pass we would begin living what I would refer to as “**OUR NEW NORMAL**”. So many folks worked tirelessly to get us back to the St. Michael Campus.

Religious communities from far and near were in touch with the Community Leadership offering any assistance needed. The St. Michael's Guild made sure everyone had new nightgowns, slippers and robes. Sisters living outside began shopping for new clothes and thanks to Antonio and all our staff, we were back here in the infirmary area in about 12 or 13 days - a miracle in itself. What a wonderful day it was to return home.

Was it different? For sure... Privacy was gone, the silence and quiet of the chapel would be replaced by this small space and all it entails. We learned to pray and sing even with the sounds of the phones ringing, the kitchen staff

behind us getting breakfast ready, the not so quiet footsteps of the constant stream of workmen doing what they needed to do here.

And through it all — WE SURVIVED — well at least, we didn't and haven't killed each other yet. It was and still is a traumatic experience for all of us but we are all doing what needs to be done. It's what most of us have done all along throughout our religious lives - we've done what needed to be done. And in my opinion we are better people for the experience.

For a little while we experienced on a small level what many people face everyday of their lives. You see, on the day of the fire, we all had something to eat, we all had warm beds to sleep in that night and in the months following. Our brief sojourn away made us more aware of the almost 65 million people on our planet who are misplaced, no home, no country. We've watched the devastation of peoples lives, wiped out by floods and hurricanes and fire. We've seen the hatred in the world as we witnessed terrorists bombings around the world and the injustices and prejudices within our own country.

As community we struggled with the devastating passing of Kristin. We said goodbye to Margaret Barry, Bridget Greene, Alice Lynch, Elizabeth Ann Gavin, Nora Molynieux and even Charlie who gave us such joy and unconditional love.

We moved through the liturgical seasons off the year, Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. Summer came and summer — well, it really hasn't left YET! In September we celebrated the Final Profession of Sr. Sheena. We see the work moving forward in the building behind us. We said Happy Retirement to Sr. Bridget and we've welcomed Sr. Kathleen as Community Pastoral Care and Merri Buckstone as our new administrator.

It's Fall once again on the Hudson River. The leaves are changing colors, the days getting shorter and nights getting longer. Just like the seasons change so do we.

We move forward in hope, ever thankful for the Provident Hand of Our Loving God. Perhaps the biggest changes are not the ones that we can physically see, like the changing of the seasons, but the seasons of the soul which are often times only observed by God.

And so we come full circle — ***To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under the sun.***