Blog



by Dan Stockman

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Sr. Madeline Kavanaugh, a Daughter of Charity, gives a tour of the house she shares with two other sisters in Durant, Mississippi, on Sept. 12. The three sisters serve in the area where Sr. Paula Merrill and Sr. Margaret Held served and live in the same

house Merrill and Held shared. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

This story was never supposed to be about Sister Paula and Sister Margaret.

I had been planning the trip to Mississippi for more than a year, and the story was always meant to be about Srs. Mary Walz and Madeline Kavanaugh, both Daughters of Charity, and Sr. Sheila Conley, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The three sisters are continuing the ministries of Sr. Paula Merrill, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, and Sr. Margaret Held of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee, who were murdered Aug. 25, 2016, after working in Lexington and Durant for six years.

I had written about Merrill and Held when they were killed, at the first anniversary of their deaths, and when their killer was sentenced to two life sentences without the possibility of parole plus 30 years for burglary and stealing one of the sisters' cars.

So I planned a trip to Durant to report on the new sisters and their new ministries. I was done with Good Friday and ready for Easter.

But no matter where I went in the humid Mississippi heat, Paula and Margaret seemed inescapable. Everyone I interviewed talked about them, though I didn't ask. I tried to focus on the new sisters and their ministries, but people couldn't talk about them without bringing up Paula and Margaret.

Madeline told me a story I had heard before from others: After the dedication ceremony for the memorial honoring Paula and Margaret in Durant's Liberty Park, relatives decided to visit the house they had shared. As they walked out, they were confronted by two butterflies — one larger, like Paula, and one smaller, like Margaret — that kept fluttering in their faces. It seemed as if Paula and Margaret were there, telling them it was all right.

Then Madeline gave me a tour of the house, and as we entered her room, I asked about the handmade quilt on her bed. It had been a gift many years ago, she said, but just after receiving it, she left for missions in Bolivia and the Cook Islands, so she left it with a relative. When she moved to Mississippi, she finally got to use the quilt. On each square is a butterfly.

"Funny, isn't it?" she said.

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As Madeline continued to show me around, I wasn't sure I wanted to see the rooms where Paula and Margaret were killed, but when I walked in, the air changed. There was a presence in each one that was almost physical, the same way you can feel the air change when you leave dry, cool air-conditioned air and walk into air that is humid and sweltering.

Rather than a place of horror and sorrow, those rooms had become someplace holy. They had become the place where Paula and Margaret first saw the face of God, and the difference was palpable.

I hesitate to put details like the butterfly story into my work because, of course, they can never be proven, and they can so easily cross the line from heartwarming to cheesy and sentimental.

But as I was back home, typing out my story, I took a break to let the dog out and clear my head a bit. I was still thinking about how the story was supposed to be about Mary, Sheila and Madeline, but everywhere I turned, there were Paula and Margaret.

Then, as I watched the dog frolicking across the yard, something in the garden caught my eye: Two pure-white butterflies fluttered among the flowers.

Really, God?

Then I looked again and realized I was mistaken. There weren't two butterflies at all.

There were three.

[Dan Stockman is national correspondent for Global Sisters Report. His email address is dstockman@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter @DanStockman or on Facebook.]

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