Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



A pencil sketch by Mother Anastasie Brown shows the grounds of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, in 1842. Annotations by Sister Maurice Schnell appear on the sketch, part of a bound book of drawings dated 1842-1889. The community's barn and adjoining house were burned down Oct. 2, 1842. (Wikimedia Commons/Public domain/Archives of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods/Anastasie Brown)



by Sr. Dawn Tomaszewski

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It seems that everywhere we turn these days, we find someone preaching about the importance of hope, writing articles urging us not to lose hope, making speeches, composing songs about hope. In fact, we Sisters of Providence have chosen the theme "Sowing Seeds of Hope" for our 2026 General Chapter.

The focus is understandable. Very hard things are occurring now — violence, division, tragedies at both the personal and global level. So, it does seem easy to lose hope.

When I first began reflecting on hope, news had just broken of the shooting at Annunciation Church in Minneapolis. Shortly after came reports of a high school shooting in Evergreen, Colorado, and the tragic killing of Charlie Kirk on the same day.

In the meantime, war continues to rage in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan. On Oct. 10, another human being on death row was executed in northern Indiana. And just recently, I learned that 300 immigrants were being held at the Clay County Jail down the road in Brazil, Indiana, which functions as an Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, detention center.

It would be easy to lose hope.

I found myself thinking or maybe praying: "What would St. Mother Theodore Guerin do if she walked among us today? Does her life have something to say about how not to lose hope?"

She had unfailing trust in Providence. She was the epitome of the words from the Book of Sirach: "Trust in God, and God will help you; make your ways straight and hope in the Most High."

I began to wonder: How might her response to the struggles of her times inspire hope in our times?

> At the heart of [St. Mother Theodore Guerin's] blueprint for hope was absolute trust in this good God.
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Historical accounts indicate that the 1840s and 1850s in the United States and in Indiana were periods of significant immigration from Catholic countries, driven by both economic hardships in Europe and the prospect of economic opportunities in the United States.

Massive immigration also created a critical need for social services, education and religious support, leading to the influx of many Catholic missionary groups of women, including the Sisters of Providence.

Unfortunately, this also sparked rampant anti-Catholic sentiment, especially among native-born Protestants. They believed Catholics were a threat to American culture, values and institutions. This sentiment came to life most notably through the Know-Nothing Party, whose goals and beliefs included restricting immigration and naturalization, holding office for "native-born" Americans only, and limiting Catholic influence in schools.

Couple this anti-Catholic sentiment with the position of women in this country. In 1848, at the Seneca Falls Convention, activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton called for women's suffrage and equal rights. Both these conditions created a perfect storm for our sisters and groups like us.



St. Mother Theodore Guerin is depicted in an image released by the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. The French-born missionary was canonized in 2006. (CNS/Courtesy of Sisters of Providence)

How did this play out in the life of the congregation that Theodore led?

For me, there is no stronger example than the fire of Oct. 2, 1842. For most of that year, the little Providence community struggled to make ends meet. Anti-Catholic sentiment influenced families to withdraw their children from our school, leading to a decline in enrollment in the boarding school and a significant loss of income. Creditors refused further credit. The bishop, who had promised to pay off the congregation's debts, used the money instead to improve their convent and build the new parish church. No wonder these years were called "The Years of Our Sorrow."

The 1842 planting season, however, had yielded an abundant harvest. With their provisions tucked away safely in the barn, the Providence community celebrated the

Feast of the Holy Angels and Mother Theodore's birthday on Oct. 2 in the peace of a retreat day. That peace was disturbed by a dreadful cry of a postulant, "Fire! Fire!"



A Book of Psalms used by St. Mother Theodore Guerin is on display at her shrine Oct. 6, 2016, at the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. (CNS/Katie Breidenbach)

What followed could have shaken the strongest spirit, especially when it was highly suspected that this fire appeared to be "the result of malice."

Out of the rubble of this fire and the loss of their provisions, I believe our St. Mother Theodore became an architect of hope.

The day after the fire, she wrote a letter to Mother Mary in France, describing their attempts to put out the fire:

> We had no water, for we have neither well nor cistern; we take the water indispensable to us from a little spring which flows naturally and which scarcely suffices for the needs of the house; our only resource was the good God. I left everybody at work and went for a moment before our Lord to ask him to protect this house, which was confided to him and where he deigned to live; fortified and filled with confidence, I returned to the workers … Nearly all have some burns, but by a special Providence, no one was seriously injured. … Our wheat, our poor wheat, all beaten down, burned before our eyes.

She goes on to say that their house was saved and concludes, "The good God has preserved us. … and everything gives hope that the worst is over."

At the heart of her blueprint for hope was absolute trust in this good God.

Jesus proclaims that very truth in the Gospel reading we always read on her feast day, Oct. 3: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father (our good God) is pleased to give you the kin-dom."

The good God has preserved us; our good God will preserve us.

Mother Theodore hope was active. Her eye was on the mission, and she played an active role in advancing it. That was her blueprint. She did not let failure or hatred deter her from bringing the light of a loving, caring God into the wilderness.

Despite the community's dire circumstances, she continued the custom of their French foundresses to open a free school for poor children whenever they opened a school for children whose parents could afford to pay tuition. That first free school was in St. Mary's Village, Indiana.

She did not let anti-Catholic sentiment keep her from admitting non-Catholic children to her school. In an 1850 letter to her dear friend and confidante, Bishop Bouvier of LeMans, France, she says that there are always 600-700 pupils in their schools. About two-thirds are Catholic. Of the other third, she quips, "We might almost say that the other third are also Catholics."

I see Theodore's hope alive in her daily choices. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, authors of *Active Hope*, define hope as "active participation in creating a better future — a tool for resilience and empowerment, allowing individuals and

communities to respond to difficult circumstances by transforming anxiety into purpose and action."

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Mother Theodore's same letter to the bishop recounts her own anxieties. She writes that they were asked to take charge of boys at the orphanage because Fr. Sorin, leader of the Holy Cross congregation in Indiana, could not send brothers for this work. She admits, "I fear we shall not succeed … " then adds, "Well, we shall do our best."

I often return to those words: "We shall do our best."

I want to make those words the blueprint for my hope. I want to take whatever anxiety I may have about all that is swirling around in my life and in our world and do my best to transform it into active hope — into purpose and action for the life of our world.

Mother Theodore reminds me that "… our hope is in the providence of God, which has protected us until the present, and which will provide, somehow, for our future needs."

May I help it be so.

***Editor's note**: A version of this article was published Oct. 3 on the Sisters of Providence St. Mary-of-the-Woods congregation website.*