



Engaging Aging

Navigating Pivotal Changes

Sister Mary T. Flood, OP

*“Start being
brave about
everything.
Drive out
darkness and
spread light.
Don’t look at
your
weaknesses.
Realize
instead that
in Christ
crucified you
can do
everything.”*

*St. Catherine of
Siena*

The Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, New York is a congregation of vowed women religious and associates committed to bringing hope and mercy to those in need through advocacy and service. For Dominicans, identity and mission are inseparable. The Dominican mission, to proclaim the Word of God, draws its specific characteristics from its foundation in the life as conceived by Dominic: vowed life in community, prayer, study, and diverse ministries which express its mission. The members are called to live the fullness of the Gospel in community, empowered by the Spirit to give glory to God and service to God’s people. Our ministry services include education at all levels, healthcare, parish and prison ministry, and programs for homeless women and children, the deaf, the mentally ill and the chemically dependent.

The Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, New York are currently navigating a pivotal phase in our history. At the heart of our efforts are two significant initiatives:

- entering into a model of shared governance with four other congregations of Dominican women;
- orchestrating good stewardship of our properties which includes the sale of our motherhouse and the relocation of our sisters.

This article outlines the engagement and efforts of our Leaders and members in both projects, highlighting our collaborative spirit and commitment to our mission.

Sister Mary T. Flood, OP, currently serves as the Prioress of the Sisters of Saint



Dominic, Blauvelt, New York. Prior to her election, she served on the congregational Leadership Team as Councilor and as medical consultant for the congregation. Sister’s ministerial background is in healthcare as a physician boarded in Internal Medicine and Infectious Diseases. For over thirty years Sister has been on the faculty of Columbia University, most recently as Associate Professor of Medicine, and has ministered as an attending physician at New York Presbyterian Hospital. Sister holds a doctorate in biology from New York University and a doctorate in medicine from Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

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Shared Governance

In an innovative move, five Dominican congregations of the northeastern United States have embraced a model of shared governance. This collaborative effort aims to foster unity, enhance resource sharing, and strengthen the collective mission of the Dominican Family. The five participating congregations include the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, New York, the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Amityville, New York, the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Caldwell, New Jersey, the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Sparkill, New York, and the Dominican Sisters of Hope, Ossining, New York.

Historical Evolution

Collaboration has been a long-standing practice among congregations of Dominican women religious in the United States. In 1935, the first meeting of the Dominican Major Superiors took place in California and was a significant event in the history of the Dominican Order in the United States. Convened in the context of the Order's growing presence in America, the gathering aimed to address various issues related to governance, mission, and the future direction of Dominican provinces in North America. During this meeting, the superiors discussed challenges such as the formation of new communities, the development of educational institutions, and the Order's engagement in social justice and pastoral work. The meeting was pivotal in shaping the direction of Dominican life and mission in the United States. It set the stage for greater unity among the provinces, fostered a

Below: Five Dominican Congregations forming a collaborative governance model.



collective commitment to the Dominican charism of preaching and teaching, and led to the formation of the Dominican Leadership Conference, presently known as the Dominican Sisters Conference.

In the 1990s, as congregations of Dominican women religious were experiencing an obvious decline in membership, the Dominican Leadership Conference fostered movements for deeper collaboration within the branches of the Order. From these efforts, congregations of Dominican women in the northeastern section of the United States journeyed through various paths of collaboration that eventually led to the creation of the Dominican Sisters in Committed Collaboration (OPSCC) in 2010. OPSCC emphasized deepened contemplation and initially supported collaborative work in the areas of vocation, formation, justice promotion, and funding projects for the poor and marginalized.

Principles to Guide Model Development

As OPSCC met quarterly, the members recognized a similar demographic trend among the member congregations, namely, our diminishing leadership pools. In their spring 2019 meeting, the Leadership Teams of five Dominican congregations of the northeast created a shared statement that committed to exploring/creating a shared governance model to be focused on canonical governance.

To achieve the creation of a model of shared governance, OPSCC committed to creating a Task Force consisting of members of Leadership and membership and engaging a facilitator to work with the OPSCC Leadership and Task Force. The process was to engage the following principles:

- the model would be one in which each participating congregation would maintain its own identity; no merger or union was considered;
- each congregation would be free to participate or not in the resulting model;
- the process would involve open and transparent communication with the membership of all participating congregations;

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- congregational collaboration at multiple levels would continue, as appropriate.

One elected leader and one member from each congregation committed to work as part of the OPSCC Task Force for Shared Canonical Governance. Sister Lynn Jarrell, a canonist, agreed to facilitate the meetings. Thus, monthly meetings on Zoom began that defined the journey of the next five years for the Task Force and facilitated the discernment process.

Emergence of Association Plan

An initial study of various models and collaborative ventures led to the conception of an Association for the continuance of the mission. An Association is a society of the faithful with canonical status. After each meeting, a summary of the discussions was prepared and communicated to the membership of each congregation in the same manner and on the same day. Joint meetings of the Leadership Teams and the Task Force were a significant part of the ongoing discernment. When COVID struck in March 2020, there was concern that it would interfere with the work of the Task Force. However, a pattern of monthly Zoom meetings already was established and enabled the continued work of the Task Force throughout the epidemic.

At critical moments in the process, such as choosing a conceptual model, writing the statutes, and formulating the directives, multiple Zoom meetings involving mixed groupings of sisters from the five congregations were held. These meetings provided opportunities for sisters from different congregations to get to know each other as well as to share questions, ideas, and concerns. At each critical junction, each congregation held its own congregational leaning to determine the willingness of its members to continue in the process.

On April 29th, 2022, the statutes for a proposed Association were sent to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The proposal was received positively though the



Above, from left: Dominican Sisters BarbaraAnn Sgro, Beryl Herdt, Ceil Lavan, Mary Ann Collins, and Mary McFarland at a community meeting in Blauvelt, New York.

Dicastery raised some questions for clarification. The questions were addressed and the directory for the proposed Association for shared canonical governance was resent to the Dicastery in April 2023.

While we still await canonical approval, each congregation has held a special assembly to vote on joining the proposed Association. The vote was almost unanimous. Because of the rapidly changing demographics of our congregations, we decided to move forward with the Association while awaiting approval from Rome as we can begin to collaborate in areas of civil responsibility. In consultation with the members, the Association was named Dominican Sisters Association (DSA).

Inaugural Assembly of Association

On June 14th, 2025, we are holding our inaugural DSA assembly. Each congregation can send 20 members as voting delegates and 13 sisters as observers. Prior to the assembly, each congregation will have chosen a member to serve a three-year term on the initial executive committee. The officers of the executive committee will be chosen by vote of the assembly delegates. Going forward, the future executive committees will consist of four members who will be chosen randomly from the member congregations. Each of the founding congregations can access the shared governance structure as needed and the Association is open to new members.

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We foresee that the development of this Association is probably a step toward a national, or perhaps international, union of Dominican congregations. Nine Dominican congregations from the Midwest and West are dialoguing about coming together in a new model of shared governance. The rapid demographic changes in religious life have intensified the urgency to consider new ways of collaborating and sharing leadership.

In October 2025, the Dominican Sisters Conference (DSC) is holding an “Encuentro” that will include elected leaders and members working to chart pathways for the future. Such strategic visioning will support the DSC's broader work for sustainability and flourishing of Dominican life and mission. Other congregations of Dominican women religious and other charism families have expressed interest in this model of shared governance. If approved, this model enables congregations to address emergent needs as they arise and, at the same time, retain the canonical status and autonomy of each congregation.

Rightsizing Our Facilities

Concomitant with the development of the Association for shared governance, our congregation took a serious look at rightsizing and the future good use of our buildings and properties on our motherhouse grounds. As we prepared our sisters for a discussion on the future use of our motherhouse and buildings on the campus, we recalled for the sisters the many changes that had taken place over the years regarding our properties that had led to the continued vibrancy of our community life and mission. The current plans for our motherhouse are part of an evolving history.

Constancy of Change

During our 146-year occupancy of the property in Blauvelt, New York,

the property we refer to as our motherhouse, we have bought, built, sold, renovated, and torn down buildings, always with a focus of advancing our mission of service to the poor and vulnerable.

Our current motherhouse, a four-story red brick building with a large statue of St. Dominic adorning the entrance, was built in 1932 and annexed to the Sacred Heart Building, a 1908 construction which then became the north wing. This became our new and second motherhouse designed with a large chapel in the center section to accommodate the 500 children in our care as well as many sisters. St. Catherine's Wing, the south wing, was added in 1955, and in 1964 we built a novitiate building to accommodate the large numbers of vocations that were coming in the early 1960s.

From the 1950s to 1990s, we nurtured the birth and growth of Dominican College. To facilitate that growth, we shared and exchanged space over the years to accommodate the college's growth. Today, Dominican University New York is an outstanding achievement in advancing our mission in education, educating many students from Rockland County. It serves as a major feeder institution to many businesses and hospitals in the county throughout New York City.



Above: Motherhouse of the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, New York.

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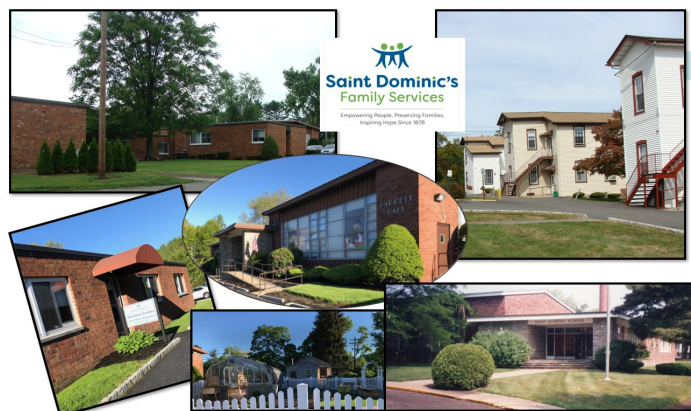
Responsive to Evolving Needs

In 1979, St. Dominic's Home, our founding ministry, underwent a major change. The campus program in Blauvelt was closed. Responding to the deinstitutionalization of facilities for the disabled in the county, we reached out to care for the developmentally and emotionally disabled. To provide this care, our cottages were renovated to accommodate severely handicapped individuals. St. Dominic School became an 853 school to serve students with special needs from Rockland County. While the closing of our campus program looked like a very dark hour for us, this amazing transition in our founding ministry enabled us to serve the very neglected developmentally disabled residents from various institutions and to educate students rejected from their local school districts because of social and emotional problems.

Today, St. Dominic's Family Services (formerly St. Dominic's Home) employs many individuals from Rockland County and has a broad outreach in preventive services for Rockland, Orange, Bronx, and Westchester Counties. As we considered our legacy and ways of supporting our ministries into the future, in September 2024, we sold to St. Dominic's Family Services the buildings they were renting from the congregation. For decades, our property decisions have been influenced by the needs of our neighbors as much as by the needs of our congregation.

Present Realities and Future Possibilities

Today, in 2025, we have 71 sisters with 54 sisters over the age of 80; 36 sisters currently live in our motherhouse, which can accommodate 72 sisters. Our demographic projections indicate that by 2030, we will number 49 sisters with 41 sisters over the age of 80. In light of these statistics, our goal is to create a sustainable, realistic and comprehensive plan of care for our sisters and the continued vitality of our mission. We want to re-imagine this underutilized sacred and historic space as a vibrant center for community engagement and continued service to those in need.



Above: Buildings and property sold to St. Dominic's Family Services by the Blauvelt Dominicans.

In June 2024, our local university hosted a panel of five town supervisors from Rockland County, all of whom addressed the dire need for affordable housing in Rockland County. As good stewards of our resources and aware of the need for more affordable housing options in Rockland, we have been in contact with a company, Concern Housing, that wants to purchase our motherhouse and construct 75 to 100 affordable apartments. Concern Housing is a non-profit agency committed to helping individuals and families to live in the community with dignity and enhanced opportunities through the provision of housing and support services. It is one of the largest housing agencies of this kind in New York State.

In their proposed renovation, the outside of the motherhouse building would not be changed and our beautiful chapel would be preserved for our congregational and broader community use. We feel this would address the significant need in Rockland County for housing for veterans, seniors, and others while aligning with our mission. However, this project needs to be approved by the town board and faith-based affordable housing has been a controversial issue in New York State. Aware that, as the *cliché* says, "we should not put all our eggs in one basket," we have engaged Hoffman Planning, Design, and Construction, Inc. with a grant from SOAR! to research alternative

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buyers for our motherhouse whose project would support our mission. We have learned that Dominican University New York, with whom we share the campus, is interested in purchasing the building. The University has formed a research committee to do a feasibility study in conjunction with their planned capital campaign. By embracing the opportunity that faces us today, namely to consider the conversion of our underutilized motherhouse into affordable housing or an extension of Dominican University, New York campus, we honor the legacy of our past while charting a course for a dynamic and impactful future.

Engagement of Our Sisters

The Leadership Team has undertaken a comprehensive and inclusive approach to engage the congregation in the planning and decision-making process regarding the future of the motherhouse and the relocation of the sisters. This multi-faceted strategy is designed to ensure that all sisters are informed and feel valued and involved as we navigate these significant changes.

- Several congregational information days were organized where sisters gathered to receive updates on the planning process. These sessions served as a platform for Leadership to communicate the rationale behind the decision-making and their vision for the future. The open format allowed sisters to ask questions, express concerns, and share their thoughts, fostering a sense of transparency and community. Sisters are encouraged to articulate their hopes and dreams for the congregation. By involving members in these discussion sessions, the Leadership Team ensured that the sisters' values and aspirations were heard and addressed in the planning process.
- Updates are reported to sisters on a regular basis in our weekly newsletter, which also provides a means to address questions and concerns that the sisters have voiced.
- To keep the congregation engaged and informed, the Leadership Team is utilizing various multimedia tools. Informational videos



Above, from left: Dominican Sisters Didi Madden, Joan Argo, and Jo-anne Faillace at a meeting in Blauvelt, New York.

are being created to present updates on the future of the motherhouse and to showcase potential housing options. They serve as an engaging way to disseminate information and make the planning process more understandable.

- Discussion groups are also being established to provide smaller, more intimate settings for sisters to voice their opinions and share experiences. These groups will encourage open dialogue and help build community. Facilitated by members of the Leadership Team, these sessions will allow for deeper exploration of the relocations.

Alternatives for Sisters' Housing

The Leadership Team has conducted research to identify optimal housing solutions for the sisters. This process involved assessing various options that would meet the diverse needs of the congregation, especially for those sisters requiring more assistance as they age. The research included analyzing available facilities, services offered, and other amenities to ensure an enriching environment.

The two facilities most desired by the sisters are Marian Woods and the Dominican Convent in Sparkill, which is located one mile from our motherhouse. Marian Woods is an

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intercongregational adult care facility for religious communities of women. Designated as an independent living residence, it provides some assistance and is investigating its licensure to qualify as an assisted living facility. Dominican Convent, on the other hand, is the motherhouse of the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Sparkill, New York, a member of our charism family and one of the five congregations participating in our model of shared governance. Dominican Convent has 80 empty rooms, can accommodate all of our sisters, and provide additional space for offices and congregational meetings. The close proximity of this facility to our motherhouse as well as the relationship among the sisters from both facilities make Dominican Convent a very inviting choice. Still, this transition will involve significant changes for both congregations. The openness of both congregations to move forward in this innovative venture serves as an inspiration for other religious congregations who are facing similar challenges in today's evolving landscape.

To provide firsthand experience of potential new living environments, the Leadership Teams of both Dominican congregations and the staff of Marian Woods plan to organize tours. This will allow sisters to see their possible future homes, assess the facilities, and engage with staff and residents. This will help them to make informed decisions with respect to their needs and well-being. In addition, digital schematics of both facilities will be available so the sisters can review the living options at their leisure and engage in discussions with their councilors or the healthcare coordinator as to their desired choice.

Skilled Care Considerations

Unfortunately, we know that in making this transition, we cannot reestablish our current homecare floor, St. Martin de Porres Community. As we age and our numbers decrease, we need to face reality and recognize that we no longer have the capacity to maintain such care. We need to consider and plan for the long-term care of our

sisters who currently require or will require more skilled nursing care. We emphasized to our sisters that this decision will impact the long-term care of all of us now and into the future.

The Leadership Team is researching quality care options that will meet the needs of our sisters who will require transfer to a skilled nursing facility. We want to ensure that they will receive good care while also maintaining connections to the congregation. In this transition, the Leadership Team will work closely with medical professionals and our own healthcare team to ensure that our sisters receive the support they need. The expertise of these groups will guide us in making informed decisions about the placement of our more frail sisters.

Moving Forward Together

Through a combination of information sessions, brainstorming gatherings, discussion groups, multimedia engagement, research and site visits, the Leadership Team of the Blauvelt Dominican Congregation has tried to create a robust framework for sister engagement in the planning process. By prioritizing communication and collaboration, we are not only addressing the logistical aspects of the relocation, but also trying to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose within the congregation as we move forward in a new chapter of our life together.

Below, from left: Leadership Team of the Sisters of Saint Dominic of Blauvelt, New York, Sisters Mary T. Flood, Didi Madden, Ellenrita Purcaro, and Terry Rickard.



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