News
Ministry

A patient is pictured in a file photo chatting with Dominican Sr. Catherine Marie at Rosary Hill Home, a Dominican-run facility in Hawthorne, N.Y., that provides palliative care to people with incurable cancer and are in financial need. Rosary Hill was founded by Rose Hawthorne, later known as Mother Mary Alphonsa. She also founded the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, and on March 14, 2024, advanced her sainthood cause by declaring her venerable. (OSV News/Gregory Shemitz)

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Nestled in the serene hills of Westchester County, New York, lies a sanctuary of compassion: Rosary Hill Home. Operated by the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, this haven offers free palliative care to patients afflicted with incurable cancer.

The story of Rosary Hill Home begins with Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, the daughter of renowned author Nathaniel Hawthorne. After personal tragedies, including the loss of her young son and the dissolution of her marriage, Rose sought a deeper purpose. Moved by the plight of impoverished cancer patients who lacked care and comfort, she took a three-month nursing course and, in 1896, established a modest refuge in New York City's Lower East Side.

Her work caring for the sick in a rented room laid the foundation for what would become the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, with Rose taking the religious name Mother Mary Alphonsa.

In 1901, seeking a more tranquil environment for her patients, she purchased property from a group of French Dominican friars who had fled the persecutions of the French Revolution and settled in the country north of New York City. By 1900, they were able to safely return to France and, having heard of her work, offered Mother Mary Alphonsa a good price for the land. The property became Rosary Hill Home in Hawthorne, New York, which remains the motherhouse of the congregation she founded.

At Rosary Hill, the sisters embrace one shared apostolate: providing compassionate care to those in the final stages of cancer. This commitment is not merely a profession but a way of life. The sisters live alongside their patients, creating a familial atmosphere where charity and service are paramount.

"Everything that is possible is done to cheer them, and an aspect of home-likeness is always aimed at," wrote Mother Mary Alphonsa.

Central to the sisters' vocation is their Eucharistic life. The chapel is the living heart of Rosary Hill, from which the sisters draw strength to fulfill their mission.

Blessed Hyacinthe Cormier, superior general of the Dominican order in the early 20th century, once observed to the sisters, "You have Jesus in your midst in two ways: Jesus in the Sacrament in the Chapel; Jesus covered with wounds in the halls of the sick. Adore Him. Bless Him. Serve Him by a twofold measure of reverence and love."

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All care provided at Rosary Hill is entirely free of charge. Remarkably, since its inception, the congregation has never engaged in fundraising activities or accepted money from any form of insurance or from their guests. Instead, it has been sustained by the generosity of benefactors who are moved by the sisters' mission. This reliance on divine providence reflects a deep trust in God's faithfulness and allows the sisters to focus entirely on their ministry without unnecessary distraction. And there is always abundance.

The sisters themselves undertake all bedside nursing duties, a practice rooted in Mother Mary Alphonsa's conviction that they would no sooner delegate the bedside nursing than they would their life of prayer. "We must love them (the sick poor). The saints kissed the feet of the poor. They did not seem to do so, only; they did it," wrote Mother Mary Alphonsa.

This hands-on approach ensures that patients receive personalized attention imbued with genuine compassion. The sisters' presence offers not only medical care but also spiritual solace, affirming the dignity of each patient during his or her most vulnerable moments.

A distinctive aspect of life at Rosary Hill is "the night watch." During the quiet hours, sisters keep vigil, imitating the watchfulness of Our Lady and the Lord by remaining on call for patient care through the night. Patients often find comfort in knowing that the sisters are there, even asking, "If I go to sleep, are you going to be here?"

Living in the shadow of the cross, the sisters find purpose in consoling Christ through

their service to the suffering. Mother Mary Alphonsa, who did not have an extensive nursing background, exemplified the fundamental Christian idea that one "finds oneself by giving oneself away."

This ethos continues today, as many sisters join the congregation without prior medical training, driven by a calling to serve. They are committed to providing the best care to their patients, ensuring that the sick poor receive not only medical attention but also the warmth of human connection and the light of faith.

Mother Mary Alphonsa wrote, "Let the woman who begs for care have comfort, and bestow on this representative of Christ a little attention until she dies. This is all, yet it requires the sacrifice of your life. But that is why Christ asked it, and blesses with unending reward the simple choice."

It is this loving sacrifice of the sisters that daily pours forth God's blessings on the patients welcomed into their home.