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Heart of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas

Moved by Larger-Than-Life Statue of Sister Virgilius at Maryrest Cemetery in Mahwah

— by Maxim Almenas

Photo From Left to Right: Mark Paoletta (Fellow attorney and close friend of Justice Thomas), Jeffrey Mager (Superintendent of Maryrest Cemetery), Justice Clarence Thomas, Cardinal Joseph Tobin, C.Ss.R. (Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Newark), and Andrew Schafer (Executive Director of Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark) pose after the Blessing of the Sister Virgilius statue in Maryrest Cemetery in Mahwah, NJ.

On a lightly chilled autumn afternoon in October, with a backdrop of Mahwah tree leaves blending from green to amber, the nuns from Our Lady of the Angels Convent in Tenafly, New Jersey, stood before the new statue of Sister Mary Virgilius Reidy and two Black children in Maryrest Cemetery filled with emotion.

As they admired Sister Virgilius’s grave just a few feet away and turned to admire the statue again, they could not help reflecting on her strength and resolve to educate the poorest and most disadvantaged children in the segregated South in the 1950s.

The unveiling and dedication of the statue hosted by Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark brought together a tapestry of communities touched by Sister Virgilius. Attendees included her family members, United States Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, a former student of Sister Virgilius, and other nuns who taught and lived with her. They knew all too well the monumental sacrifices Catholic nuns made since the turn of the century.



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 Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Justice Clarence Thomas and nuns of the Order of the Missionary Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception pose in front of the statue created in honor of Sister Mary Virgilius Reidy.

Sister Irene Laurence, Provincial Minister of the Order of the Missionary Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception (MFIC), acknowledged how the statue reflects the work performed by sisters from the Diocese of Savannah in Georgia. She read from a tribute paid to the sisters by the combined Savannah black parishes of St. Benedict the Moor, St. Mary, and St. Anthony of Padua in 1986.

“Thank you sisters, for being a shoulder to cry on, for teaching us when others rejected us, for spending long hours with no pay, for working in some of the worst conditions, and for giving your all frequently with not even so much as a simple thank you,” read Sister Laurence. “I believe these words speak not only of the respect and love held for our sisters in Savannah but also of Elizabeth Hayes (Sister Mary Ignatius), our foundress, missionary, and her prophetic vision to work with the minority.”

Second and third-generation members of Sister Virgilius’s family traveled from Chicago, one of whom was inspired by Sister Virgilius to become a teacher. But no one was more emotional than Justice Thomas, who traveled from the Washington, D.C. area, to witness the blessing of the statue and could barely fight back his tears. He thanked his life-long mentor, Sister Virgilius, and all the nuns that helped blaze his unforeseen path.

“I must admit I melted down because of my nuns,” said Thomas. “This extraordinary statue is dedicated to you sisters – to all of you who have given so much and who have asked for so little.”

Before Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R., Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Newark, sprinkled Holy water to bless the statue, he told attendees of his time living in Rome and exploring cemeteries and miles of catacombs.

He described underground passageways filled with the remains of early Christians, images of Christ, and other Christian symbols. Since Roman law prohibited the burial of the deceased in the city’s interior above ground, the catacombs for early Christians provided space to honor their dead and worship underground.

Cardinal Tobin indicated that the Second Vatican Council placed particular importance on religious life – a life much like the ones being lived by the nuns in attendance and the lives of Sister Virgilius and the other nuns resting in peace before them.

“It’s not just a useful way to do good things,” explained Cardinal Tobin. It has to be a sign of something - a sign of where we go when we are taken to the ‘dormitorium’ and why our hope is secure. I think our service invites us to think about the monument of our lives, and the monuments of Sister Virgilius’s life are here. That beautiful work of art is behind me for her community, her family, and her students. The faith that upheld her to live in a respectful, just, and loving way is also her monument.”

Justice Thomas credited Dallas, Texas, real estate investor and history collector Harlan Crow and his wife Kathy Crow for their thoughtfulness and generosity to honor Sister Virgilius by financing the creation of the statue to memorialize “these courageous, selfless and godly women.” Justice Thomas also thanked the nuns from the very bottom of his heart.

The seven foot bronze statue designed by noted Austin, Texas artist and master sculptor Gary McElhaney weighs 1,800 lbs., and the two-foot granite base where they rest securely is 16,557 lbs. Through the supervision by Executive Director of Catholic Cemeteries Andrew Schafer and Michael Saul, Director of Construction, Planning & Development, the Maryrest Cemetery staff and a large crane company were able to install the statue weeks before the dedication.

While the statue of Sister Virgilius stands tall and formidable, as Thomas remembered her, the sculptures of the two Black children next to her appear focused on meeting the high expectations set by their teacher. The base of the statue bears three inscriptions, including the scriptural verse from Mark 16:15: “Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole of creation.”

The other inscription dedicates the monument to the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. The third inscription on the opposite side reads, “We lived with you, and you knew we loved you,” a phrase spoken by Sister Virgilius to Clarence Thomas.

Reflecting on a September morning in 1955, Thomas remembered starting his Catholic education as a second-grader at St. Benedict the Moor Grammar School in Savannah, Georgia. He recalled how the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and his grandfather Myers Anderson and grandmother Tina Anderson have been central in his life since that day – a story told more profoundly in his book titled, “My Grandfather’s Son: A Memoir.”



Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Justice Clarence Thomas, and Sr. Irene Laurence enjoy a conversation after the ceremony and blessing of the Sister Virgilius Monument at Maryrest Cemetery in Mahwah, New Jersey.

“Even when I wandered in the ‘wilderness’ and left the faith, they continued to tug at me and pray for me,” Thomas explained. “When I reconnected with Sister Mary Virgilius in the early 1980s, my journey home began in earnest. The nun who had terrified me in 1962 hugged, smiled, and held me.”

During that visit, Thomas reminded Sister Virgilius of a tough-love moment when she was his eighth-grade teacher and principal. When she saw Thomas’ high-scoring entrance exams scores for high school, Sister Virgilius called out Thomas for under-performing in his schoolwork by only getting good grades and not working harder to get the best grades he could achieve.

“You lazy thing, you!” she said. Thomas never forgot that. They laughed about it years later, but it was a testament to Sister Virgilius’s love and tenacity to keep pushing Thomas to higher ground. The extra effort paid off.

After studying as a seminarian at Conception Abbey Seminary in Missouri, Thomas attended the College of the Holy Cross and later graduated from Yale Law School. He served in various posts for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. After Thurgood Marshall announced his retirement from the U.S. Supreme Court in 1991, President Bush nominated Thomas to the Supreme Court, and he took his seat on the Court on October 23, 1991. Sister Virgilius testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee to support Justice Thomas’ nomination.

But despite the high accolades and achievements, Thomas continued to make the annual pilgrimage to visit Sister Virgilius and the nuns for many years with his dear friend and fellow attorney Mark Paoletta, who worked on Thomas’ nomination in 1991 and first met Sister Virgilius when she testified for the Justice.

After visiting the convent, which serves mainly as a retirement and convalescent home for elderly nuns, they always left feeling enriched, blessed, and better having done so. When Sister Virgilius passed away in 2013 at the age of 100, Justice Thomas and Paoletta attended her funeral.

To ensure the graves of their deceased nuns would be adequately cared for and provided perpetual care, in 2018, the sisters planned to relocate the 280 graves in the back of the convent to Maryrest Cemetery in Mahwah.

When Paoletta called Sister Pat Coyle to inquire whether the sisters were interested in having the statue of Sister Virgilius at the retirement home in Tenafly, Sister Pat, after consulting with Sister Irene and Sister Veronica, suggested that it would be better to place the statue at Maryrest Cemetery where the 280 sisters are now buried.

“I, for one, am immeasurably blessed and profoundly grateful to the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. They are my nuns,” Thomas exclaimed at the ceremony. “And I’m also grateful for the generosity of my friends who have made this possible.”

“But for you sisters and those saintly women who lie here [in Maryrest Cemetery], this day would not have been possible,” Thomas added. “And my life as it has been would not have been possible. God bless all of you and all of the people you have touched.”



Justice Thomas enjoys a hearty laugh with nuns of the Order of the Missionary Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception (MFIC).