

FALL 2023

# C P P S T O D A Y

MISSIONARIES OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD



# GROWING HOPE





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*PBMR staff members, volunteers gather in its urban farm.*

The urban farm at the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Chicago introduces visitors to the vibe of the place, which is an open-door policy that allows lots of room to grow.

When it comes to vegetables, corn is the great equalizer, and, on this continent, maybe it always has been.

"Everybody likes it, but it is hard to grow," said Sr. Carolyn Hoying, C.P.P.S., with a sigh.

Sr. Carolyn spends much of each growing season in the community garden of the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR), where she works hard for every success and takes each failure personally.

The corn, for instance.

"This summer, before it was really half grown, a big wind bomb blew through Chicago," Sr. Carolyn said. She lay in bed that night and listened to the howling wind. "I prayed, 'Oh please, God, save the garden.'"

Half the corn, always the tallest kid in Sr. Carolyn's botanical classroom, was blown over that night. But half remained. Focusing on that half, Sr. Carolyn found the strength to go on.



She and a crew of dedicated

volunteers work hard in the PBMR garden, in a neighborhood on the city's south side. We should call it by its proper name: it is an urban farm. It is a lively place during the growing months, and into the fall, as folks harvest the last of the produce and then tend to the raised beds, clean and oil the tools, store seeds and equipment for the coming spring.

In November, spring seems like it is a long time away, but in a farmer's mind it's always right around the corner.

"We start our first seeds in February, to give them a head start," Sr. Carolyn said. She starts the seeds in flats in an upstairs girls' bathroom in the former high school where PBMR has its center, on the corner of 51st and Elizabeth Streets.

PBMR was founded 21 years ago to raise a crop of hope in the neighborhood, to give youth a safe place to gather, to mourn alongside families who lost a loved one to violence, to be good neighbors.

There was no PBMR garden in the early years, but in 2012 the idea was planted and immediately grew, that a community

garden would do a lot of good.

“That’s the year I came here,” said Sr. Carolyn, a former elementary school teacher who was raised on a farm near Egypt, Ohio. “I came in November 2012, and people were talking about a garden. I asked, ‘Who is doing the garden?’”

She realized it would probably be her. When it was time to plant, she said, “I got a couple of kids from upstairs,” the center’s second-story gathering spaces, “and I said, ‘Come help me.’”



The PBMR’s urban farm is aboveground, in rows of raised beds built by youth and adults at the center. The foundational layer of the garden is a broken-down asphalt parking lot. No one who looked at it would have thought it was a natural place to plant a garden. But at PBMR they know hope can grow with a little encouragement.

“Out of that hard surface, all this life bursts forth,” said Fr. David Kelly, C.P.P.S.,

PBMR’s executive director. “In our own lives, in the lives of the families in this neighborhood, despite the harshness of the environment, we celebrate all kinds of wonderful and life-giving moments.”

It started with 12 beds and now has more than 70. Those

first beds were raised, but not raised enough, Sr. Carolyn said. “It was like trying to get blood out of a turnip,” she said. Live and learn; beds built in successive years were higher, holding more soil.

There’s so much to learn on a farm. The relationship between the soil, rain, sun and seeds. How living things sprout then blossom then produce—plant life proceeds in a certain order. How to keep a healthy balance. The PBMR’s urban farm is organic, so bad bugs are an everyday reality. This is frustrating but not unlike life, where there are always threats to young growing things.

A marauding horde of Swede midges, an invasive insect that feeds on crops like broccoli and cabbage, came through this summer and wreaked havoc. Sr. Carolyn sorrowfully tells the story of cleaning out the affected beds.



So many other things survived and thrived, a powerful sign of hope and God’s grace. This year, the urban farm produced nearly 6,000 pounds of food that it shared in meals at the center, with neighbors, and with food pantries nearby.

It’s a prayerful place, even when no prayers are spoken





Sr. Carolyn Hoying checks a rain gauge from a raised bed.

“Lots of tour groups come through the garden, and we tell them, ‘Whatever you want from the garden, you can take.’”

out loud. It is such a clear partnership between God and the children of God. It is a miracle that a fat tomato can come from a tiny seed, but the work it requires is no miracle. Humans have to pitch in to get the results they want, following God’s laws of nature.



People are drawn to the garden. One of them is master gardener Mary Harkenrider, who has volunteered at PBMR

for years. With Sr. Carolyn, she plans what they hope the urban farm will produce. Then they work to achieve it.

There are others from the neighborhood who stop in to help, and people from parishes far away who come to spend the afternoon. Friendship is just another thing that grows.

The urban farm is usually the first thing people notice when they come to PBMR’s center, said Fr. Kelly. “It makes a good first impression of who we are and what we stand for,” he said. “When you walk into



**In front of the wire arch built by Scouts are Precious Blood Volunteer Anna Nowalk, Sr. Carolyn, PBMR office manager Diana Rubio and Sr. Pauline Siesegh, C.P.P.S.**

that space, there is so much life and growth in a community that is plagued by disinvestment, the result of which is violence and abandonment, empty lots and empty buildings. But the urban farm is a different space, life-giving to this community and beyond.”

Those who know how to tend to plants dive right in. Those who don’t, Sr. Carolyn is happy to teach. “Lots of tour groups come through the garden, and we tell them, ‘Whatever you want from the garden, you can take.’ If they’ve never seen how a carrot grows, sometimes people will pull one up in amazement: a striking orange

spear beneath frothy fronds of green on the surface.

“It’s educational, because every year we plant something new,” Sr. Carolyn said.

Sometimes they plant things that people might not recognize or immediately like. Asparagus was a hard sell at first, “but then people found out they really like it, so we planted one bed then another.”

This year Scouts came to PBMR to build a wire arch, which supported a crop of heavy butternut squash. The arch, covered with blossoming squash, was so pretty, “we could have taken wedding pictures out here,” Sr. Carolyn said.



Knowledge of plants and how they grow is not innate. Young people who grew up without a garden have to be introduced to it. Sr. Carolyn is happy to do that. “Since I was able to walk, I was in a garden. I’ve been pulling up weeds forever, so I just know what is a weed. The kids might not know what’s a weed, so you have to show them.”

PBMR’s garden has become a neighborhood in itself, with a chicken coop nearby, and beehives. In the summer, it’s buzzing with life. All creatures—except maybe the Swede midges—peacefully coexist.

PBMR’s urban farm helps feed the neighborhood. That which is eaten was transformed into human energy, one hopes

energy for doing good, for reaching out to help others. Even just to grow or survive another day is no small thing. Human beings have to eat, and to be able to feed them is a blessing.

Every living thing has to eat. It is Fr. Kelly’s daily responsibility to feed the PBMR chickens and collect the eggs. “We have a farm now. My grandparents had a farm, and they had animals. So I thought we should have chickens here,” Fr. Kelly said. “I said it one too many times, and a parish on the south side of Chicago built the coop and run,” and the PBMR gained a flock. Another flock.

“The whole life-and-death cycle can be found there. It’s a reality on the farm,” Fr. Kelly said. “Even in the winter when it’s pretty desolate out there, there are still signs of life.”



**A sign honoring PBMR’s growing accomplishments is planted in one of the raised beds.**