

50th Anniversary of the Worcester Tornado and Destruction of Assumption College/Preparatory School, June 9, 2003

On the second afternoon of the annual retreat, I had slept and missed chapel. When I awoke, I decided to shave, another thing I had overlooked that day. Outside, I could see the towering white cloud announcing a violent thunderstorm which was already rumbling in the distance. When I had finished, I sat in a rocker and read Vespers.

The storm began and hail mixed with rain spattered the three large windows of my room, making me apprehensive. Then mud darkening the windows decided me to leave the room. In the hallway, I met Fr. Edward Moreau and we exchanged comments about the violence of the storm. A grill covering an air duct blew out of the wall. Fr. Edward turned toward the door of his room while I took one step across the hallway to the swinging doors of the stairway which led down to the religious dining room and the kitchen. Air seemed to be sucked from my lungs as I went through the doors. I froze in the corner behind the doors in the dark amid shouts of fright and crashing timbers. Brother Joe Arseneault came down the stairs from above and clung to me. A minute later, silence. We went down to the kitchen where I told some dazed sisters to shut off the gas for fear of an explosion—we didn't know what had been happening. Joe and I led two young nuns up to the religious recreation room. We overturned a leather couch to rid it of glass, sand, and branches and had the sisters sit while I went in search of clean linen to wipe the blood from their heads.

By the time I got back Joe had taken them outside. That's when I left the building and got my first sight of stripped trees, flattened houses, and black smoke as some of them burned. When I spotted Fr. Richard Richards coupling a fire hose to a hydrant, I hollered to him to save the water, we were going to need it—looking back, there was in my mind that what had taken place was not just local destruction but an extensive cataclysm. Somehow a man had driven up from West Boylston Street and volunteered to take injured people to a hospital. I put the two nuns in the car and we drove to the center of the city. We left the sisters at Memorial and then went to the central police station at Waldo St. There, I met Sister Choquet, President of Anna Maria, who had seen the twister heading our way. I telephoned Quebec to alert Fathers Henri Moquin and Armand Desautels of the destruction done to the College. They had not yet arrived. So this obliging driver took me back to Assumption, detouring up Randolph Road as police blocked us from continuing on West Boylston St. Even up there, we encountered the path of the twister, and I had to do the rest on foot. Somehow, I learned of the Jesuit's offer to take us in at Holy Cross. That is where I slept for the rest of the summer. At 11 pm that first night, I called the Montmartre again and spoke with Father Henri. Of course, he couldn't visualize what I meant by the College being destroyed, and asked me if the roof was gone. All

I could say was that I had never looked up at the roof, we were too busy finding one another and the injured. I said that as far as I knew we didn't have any more windows. Father Engelbert was dead as well as two sisters and there was no convent. Fr. Henri decided to come and see and set out with Fr. Armand that very night. On the way, they began to get reports, beginning at St. Johnsbury, that identified our storm as a tornado.

My father being ill at that time, he allowed me to use his car, and I spent the summer at first in the clean-up when I received a minor injury which landed me in St. Vincent Hospital. Later, after Fr. Henri brought the Ward School for airline hostesses at 1010 Main Street, I spent several weeks canvassing the area for families able and willing to rent a room to students.