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THE HOSPITAL MINISTRY OF THE HOLY CROSS SISTERS

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On the evening of October 21, 1861, a horseman galloped onto the grounds at Notre Dame with a message for Father Sorin from Governor Oliver P. Morton of Indiana. Nurses were desperately needed in the military hospitals and the governor asked Sorin to send Sisters to care for the wounded. Sorin immediately asked for volunteers and the next day Sister Mary of St. Angela and six others departed by train for Cairo at the southern tip of Illinois, five hundred miles from Notre Dame. Once in Cairo, the Sisters reported to General U.S. Grant who assigned them to the military hospital in Paducah, Kentucky. The Sisters boarded a river boat straight away and arrived in Paducah that same night.¹ As Sister Georgia Costin noted in her history of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in the nineteenth century², “On that October Monday (the Sisters) were a community dedicated to the teaching of small children and young ladies and to the performance of domestic duties in their own establishments and in some of those of the Holy Cross men. On Tuesday they had embarked on their new ministry of caring for the sick, the wounded, the dying”.

The success of the Sisters as nurses at the Paducah hospital brought them to the attention of Simon Cameron, Secretary of War in the Federal Government. Cameron asked Mother Angela, who served as the directress of all the Marianites assigned to the military hospitals, to

¹ Anna Shannon McAllister, *Flame in the Wilderness* (Notre Dame, IN: Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1944), 168-171. The Sisters' council had already decided on October 15, 1861, to send Sisters to serve as nurses. *Chronicles of St. Mary's Convent*, I, 206, in the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana (hereafter SHCA). Selections from the diaries of the Sister nurses are in M. Eleanor, *On the King's Highway: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Cross of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception* (N.Y.: Appleton, 1931), 233-268. The originals are in the SHCA.

² M. Georgia Costin, CSC, *Priceless Spirit: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1841-1893*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 179.

take over the nursing at a government hospital in Louisville. After a bloody battle at Belmont, Kentucky, in November 1861, Angela was asked to provide Sister-nurses to care for the wounded at a hospital which the government had hurriedly opened in Mound City, Illinois. In February 1862, after the battles at Forts Henry and Donelson, 1400 wounded arrived at this hospital within a span of three days.³ⁱ

These military hospitals near the front lines were often hastily organized, poorly supplied and located in buildings which had been put up to serve as warehouses and factories. The doctors were frequently overwhelmed by the sheer number of sick and wounded whom they had to treat. In any event, the surgeons' skills were quite limited although they would improve considerably because of experience gained during the war years. Sanitation, insofar as any thought was given to it, was primitive.

When Sister Augusta and two other Sisters arrived at the military hospital in Cairo in December 1861, they were horrified to find that every room on the first floor was strewn with human legs and arms. As the wounded were brought in from the battlefield, they were laid anywhere and amputations took place. Some of the wards resembled a slaughter house, the walls were so spattered with blood. Undaunted, the three nuns pinned up their skirts and set to work. While soldiers carried away the amputated limbs, the Sisters washed the walls and floors until the hospital was comparatively clean, in spite of the thick, muddy water of the Ohio River.⁴

The unsanitary conditions gave rise in turn to epidemics of typhoid, small pox and other diseases which affected not only the wounded but also family members who came to visit them in the hospitals as well as the doctors and nurses. In addition to their nursing duties, the Sisters buried the dead or sent them home for burial, kept records, notified the next of kin and tried to

³ McAllister, 172-174, 187-188.

⁴ Chronicles of St. Mary's Convent, I, 219.

return children to their families when they were orphaned as a result of their mothers having died while tending to a stricken husband.⁵

In January 1862, the Sisters had taken charge of the nursing duties at the military hospital in Cairo. By April, a contingent of Sisters was working at Jefferson Barracks Hospital in St. Louis. In June, several Sisters began serving as nurses aboard the U.S.S. Red Rover, a hospital ship which plied the Mississippi carrying the sick and wounded to the military hospitals. As the first nurses aboard a hospital ship in the U.S. Navy, these nuns were the forerunners of the Navy Nurses' Corps.⁶ In July, the Sisters took charge of nursing at The Overton, a hotel turned into a hospital in Memphis. By the end of 1862, the Sisters had closed their school in Washington in order to staff St. Aloysius Military Hospital in the capital until that facility was closed at the end of October 1863. As the number of hospitals confided to the Holy Cross Sisters by the Federal Government increased, more and more nuns were sent from Notre Dame and St. Mary's and the burden of work for those who remained behind became all the heavier. All told, eighty Sisters, about half of all the professed Marianites in the northern states, had seen service in the military hospitals by the end of the war in 1865.⁷ "The oft told tales of hospital life" were a feature of convent life for years to come.⁸

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

A development of a different sort but with far-reaching consequences for their future ministry occurred when the war ended and the Sisters who had been serving in the military

⁵ M. Campion Kuhn, "The One Woman: Mother M. Augusta, First American Superior General," 1987 Conference on the History of the Congregations of Holy Cross (hereafter CHCHC): 6-7.

⁶ Emmet F. Pearson, "The Historic Hospitals of Cairo", Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, April 1984, 26-28.

⁷ McAllister, 176-215. See also the file "St. Aloysius Hospital, Washington, D.C." in the box "Civil War: Sisters' Services", SHCA.

⁸ Maria Assunta Werner, "The Sisters of the Holy Cross During the Spanish-American War, 1898-1899," 1986 CHCHC, 1.

hospitals were released from their duties. Bishop Juncker of Alton, Illinois, and the parish priest in Cairo, Illinois, made an urgent plea that three or four Sisters experienced in nursing remain in Cairo and open a private hospital there. The request was turned down at the time but about a year later, Mother Angela had occasion to pass through Cairo and found that many passengers suffering from fever were customarily put off the river boats there. Unable to get medical assistance, these people often died from exposure on the river bank. Confronted with this state of affairs, the Sisters decided to rent a house in the town and to start a small hospital. Two Sisters arrived in Cairo in September 1867 to open St. Mary's Infirmary, the first in the network of health care facilities which the Sisters of the Holy Cross would develop over the next 120 years.⁹

There is no record that the Sisters of the Holy Cross, separated from the rest of the Marianites as an autonomous congregation in 1869, made a deliberate decision to establish hospitals throughout the western and midwestern United States and to assign a number of Sisters to nursing and to the care of the sick, but this they did. As a result of their service in the military hospitals during the Civil War, the Sisters of the Holy Cross had in their ranks a large number of experienced nurses. In the era before the discovery of anti-biotics, the recovery of the sick depended in large part on the body rallying its own recuperative powers. To the extent that decent food, sanitary living conditions and devoted nursing care could assist the body's proclivity toward survival, the Sisters made excellent ministers to the sick and they were well and justly regarded for their skills. As requests for their services were received and accepted in the decades after the war, the Sisters came eventually to make the care of the sick one of their major commitments.

⁹ Big Book of Accounts, 272-280, SHCA.

The second hospital that the Sisters of the Holy Cross opened was in Salt Lake City, more than fifteen hundred miles west of Notre Dame. Two Sisters had been sent to Salt Lake City in June 1875 at the invitation of Rev. Lawrence Scanlon, the pastor of the approximately 800 Catholics who resided in the Utah Territory, to open a school for girls. Five more Sisters arrived in time for the opening of St. Mary's Academy in September. In October, three Sisters opened Holy Cross Hospital in a rented brick house which could accommodate twelve patients. It was soon too small. In 1881, the Sisters erected a new hospital building with 125 beds.¹⁰

With such a small number of Catholics in Utah, the survival of both school and hospital depended on establishing a reputation good enough to win the patronage of the general population. The prosperity of their institutions attests to the fact that the Sisters managed not only to win the esteem of the Mormon majority but also to dispel much of the anti-Catholic prejudice of their neighbors.¹¹

When large silver mines were opened in the Utah Territory in the late 1870s, thousands of European immigrants came to work in the mines and on the railroads. The Sisters set up an insurance plan for the miners whereby in return for the payment of a dollar a month the men and their families would be cared for in Holy Cross Hospital should they become ill. In 1879, a second hospital for miners was staffed by the Sisters in Silver Reef, Utah, 375 miles southwest of Salt Lake and 300 miles from the nearest railroad. The Sisters were withdrawn from this institution in 1885 when the mines were closed and the miners moved away. From 1887 to 1898, the Sisters operated St. Lawrence's Hospital in Ogden, Utah, for the employees of the Union Pacific Railroad.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 410-418. Miriam Ann Cunningham, CSC, "The Sisters of the Holy Cross in Utah," 1983 CHCHC: 12, 14, 16-23.

¹¹ Cunningham, 16.

¹² Big Book of Accounts, 448-449, 530-531, SHCA

In late 1875, gold was discovered in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory. Thousands poured into the area hoping to strike it rich. Within a few months, the vicinity of Deadwood Gulch in the northern Black Hills counted 25,000 inhabitants. A priest sent to minister to the miners was struck by the frequency of mining accidents and the recurring epidemics of contagious diseases and appealed to the Sisters of the Holy Cross to found a hospital for the mining camps. Five Sisters arrived from Indiana in August 1878 after a journey of almost a week by railroad and stagecoach. They set up a small hospital in the town of Deadwood and another the following year in nearby Lead with funds collected from the miners and from local merchants. However, by 1880 the gold rush in the Black Hills was over and the population had sharply declined. Financial difficulties forced the closing of the two hospitals in the summer of 1881.¹³ An attempt to start a sanitarium for wealthy patients in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, in 1879 ran into so much opposition that it was abandoned after only one year.¹⁴

The Sisters' next venture in their growing ministry to the sick was closer to home. In 1882, two Sisters opened St. Joseph's Hospital in South Bend, Indiana, in a house belonging to Notre Dame University. Local physicians were invited to send their patients to the new facility but few responded at first. The number of patients, most of them long-term, averaged between four and eight during the first six years. In 1888-89, St. Joseph's served sixty-five patients and for the next ten years there were always between nine and sixteen patients in the hospital. However, the success of this enterprise brought unforeseen consequences. In 1892, a Protestant hospital, Epworth, was started in South Bend and the county superintendent for the poor sent there most of the patients for whom the county paid. The elections of 1898 brought into office

¹³ Franklin Cullen, Holy Cross on the Gold Dust Trail and Other Western Ventures (Notre Dame, Indiana: Province Archives Center, 1989), 56-93.

¹⁴ Big Book of Accounts, 448-449.

new county officials who were more kindly disposed to the Sisters and St. Joseph's prospered.¹⁵

In 1886, the Sisters accepted a request to start a new charity hospital in Columbus, Ohio, that would also take in enough paying patients to support itself. The six Sisters who were sent to open the foundation, survived in the beginning on gifts of food and bedding from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. The latter also provided a key to the back gate of their convent so as to spare the Holy Cross Sisters a long walk for morning Mass. Governor James Campell of Ohio attended the opening of Mount Carmel Hospital and identified himself as one of the young soldiers whom the Holy Cross Sisters had nursed back to health during the Civil War. In less than four years, the new hospital was too small and the construction of an addition was undertaken.¹⁶

The year 1894 saw the Sisters of the Holy Cross opening two more hospitals. One of these was St. John's in Anderson, Indiana, where Mr John Hickey of that city donated property and money for the establishment of a hospital after several Sisters had nursed him and his wife during a serious illness. The other was in Boise, Idaho, and it was begun at the urging of Bishop Glorieux who himself undertook to raise funds for a building. Although the money collected in the drive was less than what was needed, the Sisters' mother house in Indiana advanced the balance and St. Alphonsus Hospital opened in December "to rich and poor, white and black, Christian and Jew." Although the Sisters gave free care to those who could not pay, the institution's existence was threatened in 1897 when the county commissioners tried to assess property taxes against the hospital. An appeal through the courts ended with the commissioners' action being reversed.¹⁷

When a prominent citizen offered a substantial sum of money for the establishment of a

¹⁵ Ibid., 490-497

¹⁶ Ibid., 506-519. Brosnahan, 264.

¹⁷ Big Book of Accounts, 592-609.

hospital in Jacksonville, a town in west central Illinois, Bishop John L. Spalding of Peoria recommended that the Sisters of the Holy Cross be invited to undertake the foundation. The Sisters accepted the offer and in 1896 Our Savior's Hospital opened in a large house which had been purchased from the bishop of Alton, Illinois, in whose diocese it lay. Another hospital started by the Sisters in Springfield, Missouri, in 1899 had to be closed after only three years because of financial difficulties.¹⁸

With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April 1898, the story of the Sisters of the Holy Cross as nurses came full circle. Mother General Annunciata offered the government free use of the Sisters' hospitals in Indiana, Illinois and Ohio and she was asked in turn to assign Sisters with hospital experience "to serve God and their Government" by caring for the sick and wounded returning "from the fatal shores of Cuba." In all, twelve Sisters served as army nurses in camps near Lexington, Kentucky, and Columbus, Georgia.¹⁹

The Sisters' health care ministry continued to develop in the twentieth century and on an even larger scale. Schools of nursing were opened in Salt Lake City, Anderson, Indiana, and Columbus. In 1979, with hospitals operating under the Sisters' direction from Maryland to California, the Holy Cross Health System was established to unify all the hospitals and health care facilities. As the new corporation explained its position,

Almost all religious hospitals arose in response to expressed need. They were islands of charity in a broadening sea of developing culture and civilization. For the most part, they were established to minister to the poor. They managed to do this primarily through the dedicated work of nonpaid religious staff, through charitable gifts, and, in large measure,

¹⁸ Brosnahan, 425, 419.

¹⁹ Werner, 14.

through faith and perseverance.²⁰

In light of the closure of many Catholic hospitals in the United States and the decline in the number of Sisters available to staff health care institutions, the Holy Cross Health System was formed “to ensure economic and professional solidarity to institutions already sponsored by the Sisters of the Holy Cross.”²¹

THE MARIANITES IN NEW YORK CITY

The Marianites of Holy Cross, from whom the Sisters of the Holy Cross had separated in 1869, also re-entered the apostolate of health care in the United States in 1885. When they had established themselves in New York City in 1860, the Marianites focused their efforts on service to the French community in the city. In this capacity they came to the attention of the French Benevolent Society, a non-sectarian organization which maintained a hospital which was open to all who were French or of French descent. In 1885, beset by problems of personnel and poor management at the French Hospital, as their institution was called, the directors of the society invited the Marianites to take over the nursing duties and to take part in the administration of the hospital.²²

Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors and the president of the French Benevolent Society reached an informal agreement on the Sisters' services. Even though the agreement stated that the hospital would be absolutely non-sectarian, a storm of opposition from non-believers and anti-clericals greeted the announcement of the arrangement and threatened to undo it. In the midst of this protest, the three Marianites assigned to staff the hospital arrived from France and the members of the hospital's board felt bound in honor to let the agreement take effect.

²⁰ *Holy Cross Health System: An Overview* (Holy Cross Health System, 1986?),2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Annals of the Congregation of the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, (Le Mans, France, 1947)*, 191-193.

The French Hospital in 1885 was housed in a six-story building on West 14th Street which could accommodate twenty-two patients in its four wards and two private rooms. The Sisters lived in two rooms on the top floor and took their meals in another room which also served as the dining room for the manager, the pharmacist and the doctors. Within a week of the Marianites' taking charge, all the beds were filled with patients and cots had to be set up to accommodate the overflow. Visitors commented on the good order and cleanliness of the institution. So good did the French Hospital's reputation become under the Marianites' administration and so numerous were the patients who were cared for gratuitously, that the French Benevolent Society found itself unable to go on covering the hospital's annual deficit.

In 1888, Sister Mary of St. Cecilia, the superintendent, finally persuaded the Society to buy a larger building on West 34th Street where private rooms could be rented to more prosperous patients and the income used to support the hospital. This building had rooms for ninety patients. In 1904, the French Hospital moved again to even larger quarters on West 30th Street. As the French Hospital grew in size and renown, so did the number and the skills of the Marianites who served it.²³

The Marianites ended their affiliation with the French Hospital in 1963 after seventy-eight years of service. Some of the doctors on the staff were demanding that procedures be provided that were contrary to Catholic doctrine and the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Spellman, advised the Sisters to withdraw from the hospital.²⁴

²³ Mary Ita O'Sullivan, "The First Fifty Years in New York," 1985 CHCHC: 17-20.

²⁴ *Annales de la Congrégation des Marianites de Sainte-Croix, 1940-1991* (Le Mans, France: 1992?), 408-409.

EPILOGUE

While the Sisters' health care ministry started as a response to an immediate need and without a long term plan for its development, a larger investment of personnel and resources developed over time as needs arose. By the middle of the twentieth century, hundreds of Sisters in both congregations had trained to be nurses or hospital administrators and health care became an established ministry of both communities. In this respect, it was not unlike other ministries that in time came to identify the apostolate of Holy Cross in Canada, the United States, Bangladesh, India, Haiti and Africa. One might well say that the charism of Holy Cross is to be discovered not only by a study of its origins, but also in its history.
