

The Martyrs of Memphis 1873 – 1878

On February 2, 1865, a small group of eight clergy gathered quietly with Bishop Horatio Potter in the chancel of Saint Michael's Church, New York City, and, for the first time since the Reformation, formally constituted an American Anglican religious order: the Community of Saint Mary. The bishop heard the commitments of Jane Haight, Mary Heartt, Amelia Asten, Sarah Bridge, and Harriet Cannon. In September of that year, Mother Harriet—as she came to be called—was elected as Superior.

The Sisters carried on a variety of charitable undertakings over the next years, including a house for indigent women, a hospital, a school for poor children, an orphanage, and the like. In 1872, they acquired thirty acres at Peekskill, forty miles north of New York City, and there constructed what was to be their motherhouse.

In 1867, Bishop Charles Quintard of Tennessee was attempting to rebuild his diocese after the Civil War. He and Mother Harriet had been friends years before in Connecticut, so he turned to her for help. With Bishop Potter's permission, she sent Sister Martha to run a home for war orphans in Memphis in 1870. Sister Martha died the following year, however, and in 1872, Mother Harriet decided to make a full-scale foundation of the Order in Memphis. The bishop was amenable to her terms, and in May, 1873, she named Sister Constance—then 28 years old—as Superior of the new foundation. With her she sent Sisters Amelia, Thecla and the Novice Sister Huggetta to set up a school—they were, as Morgan Dix put it, “the flower of the Sisterhood of that day.”

Bishop Quintard had given the original bishop's residence near St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis for the new school, and all was ready to start in October of 1873, when a Yellow Fever epidemic hit the city. The Sisters wrote for permission to remain in Memphis, and when that was granted, they took charge of the sick in the Cathedral district and cared for 60 patients, of whom only eight died. In one month, half of the city's 40,000 residents had fled. Of those remaining, 5,000 caught Yellow Fever, and 2,000 died. The Sisters worked from six to six every day, beginning each day with Eucharist, and then going off to make house calls on the sick whom even their own families would not approach for fear of infection. As the epidemic gradually died out in November, the Sisters remained, caring for the recuperating patients.

In 1874, the Sisters of Saint Mary were finally able to open their Memphis school with eighty students, and a nearby house also became a school for poor children taught by a Mrs. Bullock, an Associate of the Order. All went very well for four years, so in the summer of 1878, Sisters Constance and Thecla were able to return to the motherhouse in Peekskill for rest and retreat.

They had been there for only two weeks when, on August 15, 1878, news arrived that Memphis was once again in the throes of Yellow Fever. Panic spread throughout Memphis and at least two people were trampled to death at the railroad platform as crowds rushed to flee the city. Sisters Constance and Thecla left at once

to return to Memphis, stopping in New York to arrange for forwarding of contributions and medicine. When they arrived in Memphis on August 20, they rejected offers to take up residence in the countryside and immediately turned the convent into a dispensary. Half the population of Memphis had fled by then and rigid quarantines were imposed, but the death rates mounted. The Board of Health shot off cannons and burned pine tar (thought then to disinfect the malevolent air). At the time, it was believed that Yellow Fever was passed from person to person by contact or breath, and by contaminated apparel and bed clothing, and open privies. The streets were covered with powdered lime and sheets soaked in carbolic acid were hung around sick rooms.

The Sisters immediately noticed that this 1878 version of the epidemic was far more virulent than that of 1873. Towards the end of August the death rate was running to 70 a day. In house after house the Sisters found victims—often abandoned, alone, unconscious, and without medical care. It was impossible to find formally trained nurses. Many doctors had fled the city—as had most clergymen. Sometimes it took a police order even to get an undertaker's services.

Then on August 25, Sister Frances came down with fever. On Monday night the 26th, Sister Hughetta became ill. She recovered (from what was apparently dysentery) and the Sisters were then asked to take over the Canfield Asylum for fever orphans. Within four days, fifty orphans were received, each bathed in carbolic acid solution and dressed in clean clothes.

A plea for help from home brought Sisters Ruth and Helen from Peekskill, and Sister Clare from the Sisters of Saint Margaret in Boston. They arrived in Memphis on the 2nd of August to find that Dean Harris had been infected and was in critical condition. The day of the arrival of the new Sisters, Fr. Charles Parsons, the last Episcopal priest in Memphis and their chaplain, came down with the fever and died on September 6. Now the Sisters had no priest. Epidemic deaths now exceeded 80 a day. The whole ethos of the city was insane: death wagons passed in the streets, looting and murders were commonplace.

Sister Constance wrote in her diary: "Yesterday I found two young girls, who had spent two days in a two-room cottage, with the unburied bodies of their parents, their uncle in the utmost suffering and delirium and no one nearer them but a rough negro drayman who held the sick man in his bed. It was twenty-four hours before I could get those two fearful corpses buried, and then I had to send for a police officer to the Board of Health before any undertaker would enter the room. One grows perfectly hardened to these things—carts with eight or nine corpses in rough boxes are ordinary sights. I saw a nurse stop one day and ask for a certain man's residence—the negro driver pointed over his shoulder with his whip at the heap of coffins behind him and answered, "I've got him here in his coffin.."

One hopeful sign was that Sister Frances seemed to recover. But with no priest, and working around the clock, the Sisters even forgot that one day was Sunday!

On September 5, Sisters Constance and Thecla were stricken with fever. They both refused to use the one mattress in the house for fear of contaminating it, so they lay on the bare floor. Sister Ruth reluctantly took over direction of the community. The next morning Sister Constance was unconscious and Father Parsons, the Rector of Grace Church and the last priest in Memphis, died, having read his own commendatory prayers. His last words were, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

With no one else willing or able to take charge, the Sisters agreed to take over management of the city’s Canfield Asylum that had served mainly as an orphanage for Black children and was as yet free of the pestilence.

With no clean clothing and no help, Sister Ruth put all forty children in the orphanage into wrappers. Then two of the children came down with fever. A nurse who had come from New York to help at the orphanage was raving in fever-induced delirium, and Sister Clare had to return to Church House to nurse the sick Sisters. Famine was fast approaching, and all that the Sisters had to eat were crackers and water. Because all sheets and pillows of victims had to be burned, they even ran out of bedding.

When the news of the deaths of the local priests got out, over 30 priests from all over the nation volunteered to come to Memphis. Father W.T. Dickinson Dalzell came from Shreveport, La., since he had already survived the disease and was immune—he was also a trained physician. With his arrival, daily Eucharist resumed and the Sacrament was carried to the dying Sisters. The next day Father Louis Schuyler arrived from New Jersey. He had been at the Peekskill convent when news came that the Sisters in Memphis had no priest, and he had left immediately. As Fr. Dalzell wrote: “[Fr. Schuyler] came knowing that all chances were against him, but with a burning desire to help the suffering.”

On September 8, 200 new cases were reported, and late that evening Sister Hughetta was struck down. From then on it was a constant list of brutal statistics:

On September 9, Sister Constance died at the age of 33;

On September 10, Doctor Armstrong was stricken;

On September 11, Sister Ruth, Sister Clare, and Mrs. Bullock became ill;

On September 12, Sister Thecla died and Father Schuyler was hit by the fever.

On September 14, Dr. Armstrong died

On September 16, Mrs. Bullock, the Sisters’ Associate, died.

On September 17, Father Schuyler died

On September 18, About midnight, Sister Ruth—who had been a nun for only a year—cried out “Hosanna” and died the next morning. A telegram was sent to New York: “Sister Ruth entered into rest last night. *Beati mortui*. (Blessed are the dead.) Only Sister Helen remains to be smitten with the fever. Sister Hughetta and Sister Clare are doing well.”

At the orphanage, all but four of the children had come down with the fever, and twenty-two died. Overworked there, Sister Francis became ill on October 1 and she, too, died on October 4, the feast of her beloved name saint.

Finally, Sister Clare and Sister Hughetta recovered from the fever and with Sister Helen brought order out of the chaos at Church House. When frost finally came and brought an end to the plague, over 5,000 people were dead, and the city of Memphis itself had gone bankrupt.

The martyred Sisters were all buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, and on the high altar in the Cathedral were inscribed their names and Sister Constance's last words: "Alleluia! Hosanna!"

The 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic so depopulated Memphis that it actually lost its city charter and was not reorganized as a city for fourteen years.

Nine years later, Sister Isabelle, who had lain ill for a year with a long and painful illness, told the Sisters that she had seen Sister Constance in her room near her bed on November 15. Some days later, after a night of great suffering, she said that Sister Constance had come to her again, sat beside her, and soothed her pain. And when asked how long she had to live, Sister Constance had told her, "Until Christmas." "I had hoped to make my Communion on Christmas," Sister Isabel said. "You will do so," came the answer. When she expressed the fear that her death would cast a cloud on the children's festivities, she was told, "You will not die till late on Christmas night, and before that you will be better, and suffer less, and the time will not seem long."

Father Morgan Dix wrote: "Before the memorable year 1878, many spoke against these faithful and devoted women; but after that year, the tongue of calumny was silent, while men looked on with beating hearts, and eyes dim with tears."

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Excerpted from *Stars in a Dark World: Stories of the Saints and Holy Days of the Liturgy* by Fr. John-Julian, OJN.