

An undated photo of a large recovery ward at Baltimore City (later Baltimore Mercy) Hospital.

The Business of Our Lives: *A Historical Perspective*

By Sister Mary Sullivan

Sisters of Mercy have always been moved to pray with and serve those who suffer in severe pandemics. Some say it is in our DNA, our founding grace and spirit. Catherine McAuley says simply: “These offices of mercy, spiritual and corporal ... constitute the business of our lives,” and “this proceeds ... from the grace belonging to the vocation or grace of the order.”

When Asiatic cholera struck Dublin in early 1832, Catherine and the sisters on Baggot Street volunteered to nurse in a makeshift cholera hospital set up by the board of health. Catherine stayed there most of the day, consoling the dying (for whom there was no adequate treatment) and verifying each death (to prevent any being buried alive, as the poor feared).

Clare Moore recalls: “We went early in the morning, 4 sisters who were relieved in 2 or 3 hours by 4 others and so on till 8 in the evening.” They did this for seven months, though there were only 10 of them, and they were simultaneously running a school for 200 poor girls and a night refuge for 20 homeless women.

Once, when a young woman died of cholera just after giving birth, Catherine “had such compassion on the infant that she brought it home under her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed in her own cell.” The next day, she found a trusted wet nurse who could suckle the baby.

No sister died of cholera in Dublin in 1832. What protection from the bacillus did they have? As Clare reports, “We used ... at

first change our habits and use vinegar, we then got accustomed.” Archbishop Murray said, “we should take great nourishment, *port wine* and *mutton chops*. This was literally obeyed for a week or two when it was found to be too troublesome.”

Other epidemics occurred over the next decade—typhus in Dublin in 1837, and again in Tullamore, Carlow, Charleville, Limerick and London in 1840. Writing to Carlow, Catherine said:

I feel exceedingly anxious about you in your present state of trial and fear for the health of your community, but please God the contagion will not spread ... I did

Mary Veronica Corrigan
typhus, Dublin, 1837

Mary de Chantal McCann
typhus, Kingstown, 1837

Mary Aloysius Thorpe
typhus, Dublin, 1837

Mary Bourke (postulant)
typhus, Galway, 1840

Mary Teresa Vincent Potter
typhus, Limerick, 1840

Mary Scholastica Burroughs
typhus, Bermondsey, 1840

Mary Ursula O'Connor
typhus, Bermondsey, 1840

Mary Joseph Nugent
typhus, Newfoundland, 1847

Anne Rigney (novice)
typhus, Pittsburgh, 1848

Catherine Lawler (postulant)
typhus, Pittsburgh, 1848

Magdalen Reinbolt (novice)
typhus, Pittsburgh, 1848

Mary Xavier Tiernan
erysipelas, Pittsburgh, 1848



Sisters of Mercy assist the surgical team in this undated photo of Mercy Hospital in Hamilton, Ohio.

hope that God would have spared you ... but His Holy will be done in all things.

When Mary Teresa Vincent Potter, a young sister in Limerick with whom Catherine had exchanged poem-letters, died of typhus in March 1840, Catherine immediately wrote to Elizabeth Moore:

I did not think any event in this world could make me feel so much. I have cried heartily—and implored God to comfort you—I know He will. ... My heart is sore—not on my account ... but for you.

In November 1840, when two Bermondsey sisters died of typhus in one week, Catherine wrote:

Their trial has been great indeed. [Clare Moore says] “picture us ... going to the vault with one dear sister on Wednesday, and with another on Saturday following.” They caught this malignant fever attending a poor family—all of whom recovered. Such is the mysterious Providence of God.

In the chapter on the “Visitation of the Sick” in the Rule she composed, Catherine asks the Sisters of Mercy to reverently go forward, “as if they expected to meet their Divine Redeemer in each poor habitation” or hospital bed.

A list of Sisters of Mercy who reverently went forward and died while serving the sick during early epidemics may remind us that we are a congregation “founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer.”

And always, before the “mysterious Providence of God,” then and even now, kneels a woman who “heartily” grieves her sisters’ deaths, even as she thanks God for their merciful lives.

Mary Joseph Joyce
cholera, Galway, 1849

Mary Agnes Smyth
cholera, Galway, 1849

Mary Agatha O'Brien
cholera, Chicago, 1854

Mary Winifred Sprey
cholera, Liverpool, while nursing in the Crimea, 1855

Mary Elizabeth Butler
typhus, Liverpool, while nursing in the Crimea, 1856



In 1917, a medical team in the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital emergency room tends to a badly injured man, possibly a veteran of World War I.

CONTRIBUTE to the Mercy COVID-19 Archive

Mercy Archives is collecting objects, archival materials (both digital and physical) and web content that reflect the experiences of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Community—including sisters, staff, caregivers and ministries—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Official records, including leadership activities, communications, meeting minutes and documentation of Community events and activities, will all be collected.

Personal accounts provide depth and context for what an event or era was like for the people experiencing it. To help tell the stories of the Mercy individual's experience during this unprecedented time in history, original, first-person materials such as diaries, journals, oral histories, images, recordings, personal protection equipment (masks, etc.), objects related to life under quarantine and similar materials will also be gathered.

This collection will also be a part of the Mercy International Association's digital global COVID-19 collection, which documents the ways that Mercy has been impacted and has responded across the world to COVID-19. If you wish to contribute directly to the collection, please contact the archives at archives@sistersofmercy.org or call 704.676.2721.