

## The Martyrs of Memphis



Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died . . . but they are at peace . . . because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and God watches over his elect."

Many, many years ago, when I was a young and poor seminarian in Virginia, I had a problem. I could not afford to return home to Texas every time the Seminary closed the dorms and the kitchen for holidays, like Thanksgiving, or Christmas,

or Spring Break each year. So, I devised a clever solution. Whenever the Seminary closed, I would drive north and visit one of the many Episcopal monasteries and convents that are scattered there along the East Coast, religious orders who were more than glad to house and feed an aspiring young priest for a few days. In that way, I became friends with the brothers at the Cowley Father monastery in Cambridge or with the Holy Cross brothers on the shore of the Hudson River, or the sisters of St. Helena's in Vails Gate, or St. Margaret's on Beacon Hill, or my favorite convent, the sisters of St. Mary in Peekskill.

That Community of St. Mary was founded on February 2, 1865, in the city of New York, and for the first time since the Reformation, when King Henry VIII closed down all the monasteries and convents in England, an Anglican Religious Order was formally constituted, and it was constituted in this country, and others soon followed suit. The sisters of St. Mary carried on a variety of charitable undertakings over the years, including a house for indigent women, a hospital, a school for poor children, and an orphanage. In 1873, the sisters acquired 30 acres at Peekskill and constructed a massive red-brick Victorian convent there, which became the Mother House, and in whose guest rooms I often stayed.

In 1867, Bishop Charles Quintard of Tennessee was attempting to rebuild his diocese after the Civil War and asked

the sisters of St. Mary for help in starting a girls' school. Bishop Quintard had given the original bishop's residence near St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis for the school, and all was ready to start in October 1873, when a Yellow fever epidemic hit the city. Within a month, half of the city's 40,000 residents had fled to the countryside. Of those remaining, 5,000 caught Yellow fever, and 2,000 died. The school finally opened the following year with 80 students, and all went very well for the next four years, such that in 1878, Constance, who at the age of 28 had been named the Superior of the sisters in Memphis, was resting at the order's Mother House in Peekskill for her summer vacation. It was there that Constance and the other sisters with her from Memphis received news on August 5th that the fever had struck Memphis again. While the wealthier residents of Memphis, about 30,000 of them now, were once again fleeing the city, and where at least two people were trampled to death at the railroad platform as crowds rushed to escape, the sisters of St. Mary hurried to return to Memphis. They arranged for money and supplies to be sent ahead of them, and when they arrived on August 20th, they found the cathedral neighborhood to be the city's most infected area with more than 70 people dying every day. In house after house, the sisters found victims - often abandoned, alone, unconscious, and without medical care. Plans had been made for the nuns to attend to the city's sick during

the day and to sleep out in the country every night for safety's sake, but the sisters would have none of that, and they stayed in the buildings of the cathedral comforting the sick and suffering, while noting that most of the doctors, trained nurses, and clergy had already fled the city.

The nuns and remaining priests moved among the estimated 20,000 Memphians who remained behind. The religious comforted the dying, tried to help the sick, and took care of the many new orphans. A plea for more help brought two other sisters from Peekskill, and Sister Clare from St. Margaret's in Boston. On the day of their arrival, Fr. Charles Parson, the last Episcopal priest in Memphis, came down with the fever and died on September 6<sup>th</sup>. Suddenly the sisters had no priest, and were on their own. Epidemic deaths soon exceeded 80 people dying each day. Constance, the Mother Superior and the Headmistress of St. Mary's School for Girls wrote in her diary: "Yesterday I found two young girls, who had spent two days in a small cottage, with the unburied bodies of their dead parents, (and) their uncle suffering greatly and in delirium." One night towards the end Constance wrote, "I just crawled home and fairly dropped into bed, first time for three nights," on August 27th, 1878, two weeks before she died of yellow fever. She was 33. In September and early October, yellow fever decimated the city and the volunteers working out of the cathedral. Thecla, the sacristan

for the cathedral and school chapel, who also taught music and English and Latin grammar, died two weeks after Constance. Sister Ruth, a nurse from the Trinity Infirmary in New York who came to help, and the newly ordained assistant rector at the Church of the Holy Innocents, Hoboken, who had come to help, both died five days later. Sister Frances, a newly professed nun given charge of the order's orphanage, which housed 50 children, died two weeks later. At the orphanage, all but four of the children came down with the fever, and twenty-two of them died. When the frost came and brought an end to the plague, over 5,000 people were dead, and the city of Memphis was bankrupt. Ninety percent of the city's population that remained behind had contracted the fever. The average death toll in the end was 200 people a day dying. Memphis was so depopulated that it actually lost its city charter and was not reorganized as a city again for fourteen years! In the end, 38 caretakers succumbed to the fever and died. The Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Memphis, who had written to his bishop five days before dying of the fever himself, called the sisters the "brave, unshrinking daughters of a Divine Love."

All the departed caretakers are buried near each other in the city's historic Elmwood Cemetery. The high altar at St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis, consecrated on Pentecost the next year, memorializes the sisters, where it was engraved, "The

epidemic did end for many in martyrdom, but their call was not to that. It was to one another and to the neighborhood and particularly to those who did not have the privilege and means to leave the city."

The Episcopal Church in this country commemorates Constance and her companions every September 9th. The City of Memphis has an annual "Martyrs Weekend" celebration. Normally, there is a Lessons and Carols-type service in the cathedral featuring readings from the martyrs' letters and diaries, mixed with music. There is also usually a memorial service at Elmwood Cemetery followed by a city-wide picnic. A member of the Community of St. Mary's at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, often comes for the celebration, bringing with her the chalice that was used at Eucharist during the epidemic.

The legacy of the so-called "Martyrs of Memphis," as they are known, must not be forgotten. For their story is really our story. It is in every fiber of who we are and what we are about as Christians, is it not? Episcopalians at the cathedral have followed the martyrs' example by growing into a hub of worship and social services for the local community, concentrating especially on the inequalities in housing and medical care for the poor.

In the end, the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, which really began in New Orleans, spread up the Mississippi River and then moved inland, infected an estimated 120,000 people with the hemorrhagic fever, and 13 to 20,000 died. So, I felt a strange sense of familiarity with the story of Constance and her Companions in the midst of our recent coronavirus pandemic, when while isolating from the world around us, and hiking the New York portion of the Appalachian Trail, I drove with my wife to see again the old Mother House in Peekskill, about which I had often spoken, but sadly it had since been sold and turned into condominiums. A new, smaller, Mother House, I later learned, had been constructed in Greenwich, New York, 150 miles north of Peekskill.

So, on this All-Saints' Sunday, let us all remember Sister Constance and all her Companions, along with all those many other compassionate caretakers, first responders, and medical personnel who cared for the sick and dying among us in our time, during our pandemic, an example like the sisters, of self-sacrificing love and care for one another in the midst of contagious disease. For as Jesus said, by our love, they shall know that we are his disciples. AMEN.