From France to America: Refocusing the Vincentian Mission

Part 2: Daughters of Charity

adapted from Vincentian Pioneers of the Mississippi Valley (1818-1900) by Dennis P. McCann, Vincentian Heritage Journal
The dislocations triggered by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars form the background for the American phase of the Vincentian enterprise—that is, for the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters and Sisters of Charity in the United States.
Louis William Dubourg

- Father Louis William Dubourg, who discovered Father Felix de Andreis in Rome and persuaded him to found the Congregation of the Mission in America, was also instrumental in Elizabeth Bayley Seton's decision to establish the Sisters of Charity in the United States.
Dubourg and Seton

- Dubourg played a role in helping Mrs. Elizabeth Bayley Seton, a convert, to clarify her own religious vocation.

- In 1808 Dubourg encouraged the widowed Mrs. Seton to move with her children to Baltimore where he helped her establish a school for girls. Later that year, Dubourg counseled Seton on the founding of an American branch of the Daughters of Charity, which she was to make her life's work.
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

Mrs. Seton, known today as Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s in 1809 at a farmhouse near Emmitsburg, Maryland.

[The Sisters of Charity continued to develop and blossom into independent new congregations in North America: New York (1846), Cincinnati (1852), Halifax (1856), Convent Station (1859), and Greensburg (1870). To read more, visit sistersofcharityfederation.org ]
Mother Seton’s Intention to form a Vincentian Community

- It was clearly Mother Seton's intention from the beginning to form a Vincentian community, but the uncertain status of the Daughters of Charity and the generally strained character of relations between the United States and France during the Napoleonic period made formal affiliation impossible.
United with Daughters of Charity in Paris

- In 1850, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s formally united with the restored Daughters of Charity, headquartered once again in Paris. St. Elizabeth did not live to see this; she died in 1821.
Adapting to conditions of the time

- The mission of the Daughters of Charity was adapted to the social conditions of the nineteenth-century American frontier. It was a time of rapid expansion; the great European migration, for better or worse, was pressing into the Mississippi valley without benefit of the institutions we take for granted as essential to civilization.

- Economic opportunity may have abounded, but there were few schools, hospitals, or churches to minister to the settlers' needs. The Daughters of Charity tried to meet these needs, usually without the help of official patronage.
New rules

- The American constitutional principle of separation of Church and state, so different in intent from the anticlericalism of the French Revolution, meant that religious communities were free to organize their own activities, so long as they could find private sources to fund them.
Responding to present needs

• The history of the houses founded by the American Daughters of Charity exhibits a volatility similar to that of other private ventures in the U.S.: most did not survive for more than a generation, just as most small businesses fail.

• Nevertheless, these early houses of the Daughters of Charity are testimony to the dynamism of organized charitable activity in the U.S. Though such institutions are usually short-lived, they do respond to real needs for as long as those needs exist.
Spirit of the Daughters

- The spirit of the Daughters' early houses lives on in the more stable institutions that eventually emerged from them. The development of Saint Joseph's Hospital in Chicago from its origins in Mother Gehring's cottage mirrors the story of the DePaul Health Center in Saint Louis, a venture which the Daughters of Charity launched in a log cabin in 1828.
Vincentian “Corporate Culture”

• These institutions share with DePaul University—itself begun as an adjunct to Saint Vincent de Paul parish—an ethic of public service that is distinctively pragmatic and market oriented. Such similarities in the corporate cultures of these institutions are not coincidental. They stem from a common source—their Vincentian heritage.
Clarifying Terminology

• The author states: I have deliberately departed from the way the term "Vincentian" is conventionally used in English, by making it inclusive of both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. In the past, "Vincentian" usually referred only to members of the Congregation of the Mission.

• In the commentary that follows, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity are referred to as “the Vincentian communities," to emphasize their equal contribution to the Vincentian mission.
Multipurpose institutions

• Many of the institutions founded and operated by the Daughters of Charity were multipurpose: a school for girls, for example, might also take on the care of resident orphans, which in turn might require the establishment of an infirmary.

• The subsequent growth of the institution might depend upon which of these services generated the greatest response within the communities served by the sisters.
Example institutions

• Some of the houses founded in Saint Louis and Chicago: Providence Hospital, the predecessor institution to Saint Joseph's Hospital, Chicago; the parish schools operated by the Daughters at the Holy Name Cathedral and Saint Patrick's in Chicago; and Saint Louis Hospital, founded in 1828: the first hospital of any kind established west of the Mississippi River.
• The Daughters of Charity were involved in all three forms of mission service, education, health care and social work, from the very beginning of their history in the United States.

• A ledger recording the fate of orphans cared for at Saint Mary's Orphan Asylum shows how individual children were touched by the Daughters, who tried to prepare their wards for a new and better life.
Health Care

- Manuals of instruction for nursing sisters and other hospital attendants demonstrate to us that, well before the modern professionalization of health care workers, the Daughters of Charity set a standard of care that contributed to the development of American hospitals generally.
Civil War Service

- Without much inquiry into the relative merits of the warring factions, the Daughters of Charity ministered to the wounded on both sides, especially as the fighting moved back and forth across the territories served by them.
Sr. Walburga Gehring, D.C.

• Sr. Walburga Gehring, D.C., was born in Bavaria in 1832, and received into the community at Emmitsburg in 1848.

• Her impact on the history of the Daughters of Charity in Chicago is roughly the equal of Bishop Rosati's achievement in the Saint Louis area.
• After heroic service on the front lines in the Civil War, Mother Walburga was invited to Chicago by Bishop Dugan to found a hospital here after the cholera outbreak of 1868.

• She organized the Providence Hospital in a cottage house at the corner of Clark and Diversey. Providence Hospital, the first Catholic hospital in the city, later became Saint Joseph Hospital, which was moved to its present site in 1964.
The legacy continues

• In memorializing the collaboration between Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, and between the communities they founded, we are compelled to recognize how little the basic needs of humanity have changed in a modern urban environment. Those needs, to which the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity have responded over the centuries, are still there to be met.
To read more, please visit the Depaul Library website

Included at the above link is an Appendix containing an eyewitness account of the Chicago Fire of 1871 written by an anonymous Sister. This narrative is a graphic portrayal not only of the chaos and confusion endured by the victims of the Fire, but also of the personal reactions of members of a religious community pledged to serve those victims.
Source:

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