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## **Short History of The Sisters of Charity**

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati originated in Emmitsburg, Maryland where Elizabeth Seton founded the first community of women religious native to the United States in 1809.

Shortly after its foundation the Congregation began receiving requests from bishops for sisters to serve in their dioceses. Such a request led to four Sisters of Charity opening St. Peter's school and orphanage for girls in Cincinnati in October 1829. This foundation was the first permanent establishment of a women's congregation in the Diocese of Cincinnati which then encompassed the entire Northwest Territory.

By the late 1840s the number of sisters increased to eight. In addition to the school and orphanage that they ran, the sisters visited the sick and supervised lay women who worked for the relief of the sick and indigent.

At this time the sisters in Cincinnati learned that their superiors in Emmitsburg had made arrangements to affiliate with the French Daughters of Charity. Seven sisters, under the leadership of the local superior, Sister Margaret George, refused to participate in this change. With the encouragement and assistance of Archbishop John Purcell, they formed the diocesan Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati on March 25, 1852.

Their work expanded to include a boys' orphanage and the first Catholic hospital in Cincinnati. They opened a novitiate and, as their numbers grew, expanded geographically.

When the Civil War broke out, the sisters volunteered as nurses. More than one-third of the Congregation, by then numbering more than 100 members, saw service both on the eastern front in Ohio, Maryland and Virginia and on the western front in Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Immediately following the war, four Sisters of Charity were sent to Santa Fe to open the first hospital in the New Mexico Territory. By the 1880s the Congregation had sisters in cities and towns along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado and New Mexico. The sisters also widened the expanse of their work in the Midwest.

As the Congregation continued to grow, it was able to offer assistance in the establishment of two additional branches of Mother Seton's daughters, the Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth at Convent Station, New Jersey (1859) and the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill in Greensburg, Pennsylvania (1870).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Congregation became involved in work with Italian immigrants. The Santa Maria Italian Educational and Institutional Home was incorporated as the first Catholic settlement houses in the United States and became the foundation for an archdiocesan social service program.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, schools of nursing were begun in hospitals sponsored by the congregation. The Congregation assumed responsibility for running a boarding school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in 1915. The establishment of parish, diocesan and Congregation-sponsored high schools required the involvement of more and more sisters. And in 1920, the College of Mount St. Joseph was founded to respond to the increasing demand for higher education for women.

In the 1920s the decision was made to become a papal Congregation. The most important of the changes brought about by this event were the adoption of new constitutions and habit.

China became the first foreign mission for the Congregation. In 1928 six sisters arrived in Wuchang, a city about 750 miles from Shanghai. They opened a hospital and dispensary, cared for the aged and orphans, ran a school for young children and a training program for nurses. A novitiate was opened there in 1934. The sisters worked through the Japanese invasion and occupation during World War II and the Chinese civil war but left in 1949 in the wake of the Communist takeover. Other foreign involvements included running an orphanage in Rome in the 1950s and 60s, missions in Peru from 1960s-1990s, a brief sojourn in Africa during the 1970s. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati have members serving in Guatemala, Ecuador, Poland and Armenia.

The impact of the Second Vatican Council caused reassessment of ministry, lifestyle, sponsorship of institutions and internal governance. An Associate program, initiated in 1975, invites friends and co-workers to share in the mission of the Congregation. In 1979 all Sisters of Charity sponsored healthcare institutions were

brought together in the Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems. This system became one of the largest Catholic healthcare systems in the United States and in 1995 became part of Catholic Health Initiatives.

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati currently have approximately 565 members. Besides traditional ministries of teaching, healthcare and social works, sisters are engaged in parish ministry, administrative positions, and work with senior citizens and the poor. Presently they are located throughout the United States and in several foreign countries.

The Motherhouse is located at Mount St. Joseph near Cincinnati, Ohio.