Impelled by the Love of Christ - SCN in Mission

The year 2012 marks the bicentennial anniversary of the foundation of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. As a tribute to these sisters, we offer a reflection on aspects of the Vincentian charism that permeated their 200 years of ministry.

**Trust in Divine Providence**

Congregations formed in the spirit of Saints Vincent and Louise are characterized by boundless trust in the Providence of God and an unwavering commitment to respond to 'what is before them.' In the early 19th century, the immediate needs facing Catherine Spalding and her companions in rural KY were education, care for orphans and for the sick. Between 1812 and 1834 the fledging community lovingly began all three ministries.

Education was their first priority. At great personal sacrifice, the sisters built a school at St. Thomas, the original site of their foundation. Only later did they learn that the land on which they built could never belong to them. In 1822, with meager resources and firm trust in Divine Providence, the Congregation purchased land north of Bardstown, the site of the present Nazareth campus. Here they could build and expand as needed.

In 1832 a cholera epidemic devastated Louisville and Bardstown. The sisters closed their schools and went into the homes of the sick and dying. The epidemic increased the already large number of children left orphaned by parents who died on river boats enroute to Louisville. The community responded by opening St. Vincent’s Orphanage, the first of many SCN homes for children who had no one to care for them. The first privately owned hospital, St. Vincent’s Infirmary, actually began in a vacant wing of an expanded orphanage. From these modest beginnings a constellation of schools, orphanages and hospitals grew. Witness the numbers:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1850-1875</th>
<th>1900-1925</th>
<th>1950-1975</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 colleges</td>
<td>77 schools</td>
<td>1 college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 schools</td>
<td>77 schools</td>
<td>US: 77 schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 orphanages</td>
<td>6 orphanages</td>
<td>6 orphanages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hospitals</td>
<td>6 hospitals</td>
<td>10 hospitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 RN schools)</td>
<td>(7 in India)</td>
<td>(1 in India)</td>
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The SCN mission expanded beyond U.S. borders when two young Jesuits came to Nazareth in 1946 with a request from Bishop Sullivan of the Patna Diocese for sisters to staff a hospital and later a school in northern India. The Jesuits said that their Bishop was looking for a “religious order with a charism for risk in ministry.” Overwhelmed by the multitude of appeals for sisters to serve here at home, Mother Ann Sebastian and her Council initially refused this request. Unexpectedly, later in the day, the two Jesuits received the good news that the community would accept this mission. The Spirit worked quickly on the hearts of the Council.

**Steadfastness in Mission**

The Sisters’ steadfastness in mission manifested itself in their capacity for self-sacrifice, adaptability and resourcefulness in the midst of great hardship.

In 1919 SCNs established Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Mt. Vernon, Ohio. Because of the anti-Catholicism that permeated the area, only a few patients, usually in a dying condition, came to the hospital. The sisters’ commitment and perseverance in providing compassionate health care gradually overcame the intense prejudice that continued for decades. The sisters served the people until the hospital closed in 1979.

The sisters responded generously to the educational needs in southeastern Ohio where immigrants of numerous nationalities flocked to work in the coal mines. The diversity of languages presented a real problem for pastors and teachers. In the spring of 1929, after meeting with Polish parents whose children could not understand English-speaking teachers, the pastor of St. Stanislaus parish related the problem to Mother Mary Catherine. Within a week of the pastor’s call, Mother transferred the lively and gifted Sister Austina Romanowski from Kentucky to Maynard, Ohio to teach in both Polish and English.

In the mid 1950’s, Sister Mary Jude Howard served at Nazareth Hospital in Mokama, Northern India where there was no electricity. Distressed at the frequent death of preemie babies, Sister noted the need for incubators to keep the babies warm after birth. Her ingenious mind and heart figured out a way to make incubators by cutting empty rectangular kerosene cans to form a cradle, lining them with small pillows and blankets warmed by lanterns, and held up on four sticks. Her incubators didn’t look like much, but they kept the preemies alive.
Wisdom in Communal Discernment

“What are your thoughts, my sisters?” (Vincent de Paul)

In respect to the possible merger with the Emmitsburg community in 1841, Catherine informed the community of the situation, gathered them in prayer, read her letter to Bishop Flaget and invited all who wished, to sign it. Tradition tells us that she then left the room. Catherine anticipated the call for communal discernment stated so well in Vatican II … it happens … that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good. (Gaudium et Spes, #44) To Bishop Flaget's credit, he listened to his “daughters.”

In 1974 the SCN General Assembly called the community to a life-style of shared corporate reflection. Two years later, the Constitutions Committee involved the total community in a four year process of prayerful reflection and honest dialogue in the revision of the Constitutions. (1976-1980) This effort concluded with a community written Constitutions sent to Rome for approval in 1981. Sister Margaret Maria Coon, a member of the Committee, wrote “An ever-recurring theme throughout the papers was faith manifested through awareness of God’s Providence…”

More recently, Sister Mary Elizabeth Miller, President, called the community to a day of prayer and discernment designed to gather the sisters' wisdom on how to respond to the 2009 Apostolic Visitation.

Empathy of Heart

From the very beginning of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, empathy was evident in the sisters' ministries. Several stories highlight this.

A father, having lost his wife and needing to travel to New Orleans to find work, presented his two-year-old daughter to Catherine, agreeing to pay one dollar a week. After seventeen weeks, the father sent $17 plus an additional $3 for warm winter clothes for his daughter. He wrote:

“…[the twenty dollars is] to be paid to Catherine, nun, for boarding my little girl in the nunnery… Good Catherine, be so kind as to favor me with a line or two, letting me know how my poor child is, as I am very uneasy about her, and sorry for the loss of her poor mother. Your afflicted, humble servant, James McGloin.”

The sisters agonized over the plight of the African American community. During Catherine’s time, she promoted instruction in the faith for the “servants” (slaves) at Nazareth. Between 1871-1943 the SCNs staffed eleven schools for African Americans in five Southern states, including St Augustine, the first school for Negroes in the Diocese of Louisville. At the request of the Passionist Community, the sisters opened a 50-bed hospital in Ensley, Alabama where African American doctors, who were not allowed to practice in public hospitals, cared for their own people. Mother Ann Sebastian Sullivan wrote, “This project will be charity, purely charity, one which we shall entrust to Divine Providence, with one sole offering, our good will.”

From 1904-1950 the Kentucky Day Law prohibited any educational institution from admitting African Americans. When this law was rescinded, Nazareth College immediately opened its doors to African Americans and by December
1950 had the largest number of African American students of all Kentucky colleges.

At the outbreak of the 1918 Spanish Influenza Epidemic, the military requested the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth to nurse the approximately 14,000 men suffering from the flu at Camp Taylor, Louisville, Kentucky. Both nursing and teaching sisters went to minister to these soldiers. Upon surveying their patients, the sisters immediately requested pajamas for the men. After a week most of the sick were out of their uniforms. The next request which came a few days later was for sheets and pillowcases.

The sisters’ arrival in the camp saw a notable decrease in the death rate. One soldier said to a sister, “We did not have this attention before you came. We had no idea the Catholic sisters were such good women.” The soldiers were amazed to discover the sisters received no salaries for their services.

Wisdom in Communal Discernment, Trust in Divine Providence, Steadfastness in Mission and Empathy of Heart are not only virtues that were needed in the past, but values that every Sister of Charity and Associate need to continually nurture today.


Coon, Margaret Maria, SCN. Her Spirit Lives. Nazareth, KY, 2007


Krumpelman, Frances, SCN. Sisters of Charity of Nazareth 1812-2012 Timeline in Heritage Hall, Nazareth, KY

Reflection Questions

1. What are some examples of these virtues in the history of our congregation?
2. How may we cultivate these virtues today? Communally? Personally?

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