Women of Faith and Service:
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of Cincinnati

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Over one hundred years old, an impressive red brick structure stands high above the Ohio River, west of Cincinnati. Many travelers, wondering about its identity, are told simply, “That’s the Mount.” Few would suspect that the roots of Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity can be traced to four women who arrived in the young metropolis in 1829. They were responding to an appeal from Cincinnati’s first bishop, Edward Fenwick, O.P., to serve a small, poor, Catholic population.

These women were members of a religious community founded in 1809 by Elizabeth Bayley Seton with its motherhouse in Emmitsburg, Maryland. As members of the first foundation of a new congregation of apostolic women religious in the United States, they embraced an adapted version of St. Vincent de Paul’s *Common Rule for the Daughters of Charity*. They were devoted to the special spirit expressed in their community motto: “The charity of Christ urges us.” In the spirit of Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the Sisters made a priority of being available to the poor and needy in a variety of ministries. Soon after the community’s foundation, superiors began receiving requests for Sisters from dioceses around the United States. Such an appeal came from Cincinnati as early as 1825.
The Roman Catholic diocese of Cincinnati was created in 1821, just two years after a small group of Catholics built a frame church at the corner of Liberty and Vine Streets. When the church opened on Easter Sunday 1819, a congregation of about one hundred worshipers gathered.\footnote{Rev. John H. Lamott, \textit{History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati 1821-1921} (New York: 1921), 38.} It was not until one year later that the new prelate, Edward Fenwick, O.P., arrived in Cincinnati. A seasoned missionary in Kentucky and the Northwest Territory, he was well prepared for his new position. Soon after arriving, the bishop purchased property on Sycamore between Sixth and Seventh streets in the downtown area of the city. He had the small frame church moved there and named it St. Peter’s. Driven by financial concern and the need for personnel in his western outpost, Fenwick left for Europe in May 1823 on a begging trip. Shortly after his return, he sent a request to Emmitsburg, asking for Sisters of Charity to serve in his diocese.

The bishop’s initial application met with refusal precisely because of the poverty of his church. Father John DuBois, S.S., the priest-superior of the Sisters, informed Fenwick that the community required the local church to assume responsibility for travel expenses for the Sisters as well as guaranteeing their ongoing financial support.\footnote{John Dubois to Edward Fenwick, 30 December 1825, from Emmitsburg, Archives University of Notre Dame, hereafter cited as AUND.} Fenwick was unable to provide this, but the hope of securing Sisters of Charity remained alive. By 1829, urged by several Catholic laymen, he renewed his appeal, sending a letter May 9:

\begin{quote}
Venerable and Dear Mother:

Confident that great good may be done in this city by the establishment of a female orphan asylum under your zealous and charitable care, I have written to the Rev. Mr. L. Deluol of Baltimore, your Superior, to beg of him 3 or 4 of your pious Sisters who are well calculated to conduct such an establishment in this place, and now have to request that you will consent to send me
\end{quote}
not less than three of your worthy community for that purpose.

Mr. M. P. Cassilly and others have engaged to furnish you a good and comfortable house, rent free, as long as you wish to occupy it, and $200.00 in cash annually towards your support and to refund, if required, all expenses of your journey to this place.

I am myself unable to contribute anything in a pecuniary way towards your establishing yourselves here, but will do all in my power to give you spiritual comfort & advice & endeavor to render you happy and content.

I hope you will set out in time to de(s)cent the river before it becomes too low for boating.

My compliments & blessing to all your community & beg(g)ing your prayers.

I remain very affectionately

Your cordial friend,

+ Edward Fenwick.³

In October the prelate visited the Emmitsburg motherhouse while attending a bishops’ meeting in Baltimore. Here he learned that his request had been granted, and the Sisters would leave shortly for Cincinnati.⁴ After fifteen days of tedious travel by stage and riverboat, they arrived October 27, 1829. This was the eighth mission established by the Community.

Sisters Fanny Jordan, Victoria Fitzgerald, Beatrice Tyler and Albina Leavy stayed with the Patrick Reilly family until a two-story frame house located near St. Peter’s was available. Naming their establishment after the Cathedral, they immediately took charge of five orphan girls

³ Edward Fenwick to Venerable and Dear Mother, 9 May 1829, from Cincinnati, Archives St. Joseph Provincial House 7-10-6, #76, hereafter cited as ASJPH.

⁴ Mother Augustine Decount and Mother Xavier Clark (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1938), 46.
and opened a free school with six additional students. As the orphanage and school grew, children of many denominations enrolled. Perceived as a threat by nativist forces, St. Peter’s as well as other Catholic establishments came under attack. This was part of a national anti-Catholic movement fueled by a dramatic growth in membership in the church due to immigration.

The Sisters’ efforts, however, met with appreciation within Catholic circles as this letter to The Catholic Telegraph attests:

**St. Peter’s Orphan Asylum and Free School**

*Messrs. Editors: . . . My object . . . is to express the high gratification experienced during the annual examinations . . . . The scene was entirely free from that ostentatious parade that so frequently accompanies exhibitions of this kind: and one could easily imagine that the retiring and amiable spirit of the Sisters who superintend the school had been transferred into the several interesting individuals who had been placed under their instruction. The neat simplicity of the place was, in itself, an eulogism on the perfect order with which everything was conducted within . . . . I thought it a duty to notice modest merit, and to pay a just tribute of respect to the Sisters of Charity, who have done so much for the advancement of moral and religious education in our city.*

The summers of 1832, 1833 and 1834 brought both sorrow and added labors: the dreaded cholera appeared in epidemic proportions. In the summer of 1833 alone, Cincinnati averaged forty deaths per day. The Sisters responded heroically, as the number of orphans increased dramatically. Newspaper articles praised them and the priests who remained in the city to care for the sick while others fled in panic. Bishop Edward Fenwick himself fell victim to the disease September 26, 1832, while on a missionary journey in northern Ohio.

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5 *The Catholic Telegraph*, 28 July 1832.
7 Martin Henni to Archbishop of Vienna, 1834, Archdiocese of Cincinnati reports to the Leopoldine Society, AUND, Reel 2, #85.
The new bishop, Rev. John B. Purcell, who arrived in November 1833, was no stranger to the Sisters. Having spent a number of years at Mount St. Mary’s near their Emmitsburg motherhouse, he remained a good friend to the Sisters of Charity during the fifty years of his episcopate in Cincinnati. He often looked to them for assistance, remarking to a friend shortly before his death, “Ah, there go the dear Sisters of Charity, the first who gave me help in all my undertakings, the zealous pioneer religious of this city and the first female religious of Ohio – who were never found wanting and who always bore the brunt of the battle.”

From its founding St. Peter’s “had depended on casual charity and the unceasing exertions of the excellent Sisters,” but the growing number of orphans and students necessitated finding new means of support. In early 1833 a number of young ladies started an annual tradition of holding a benefit fair. In addition the new bishop established St. Peter’s Benevolent Society. Within a short time this organization grew to approximately 400 members, each paying an initiation fee of fifty cents and a monthly contribution of twenty-five cents. An additional type of financial support came from collections taken at charity sermons preached at the Cathedral. This ongoing financial support as well as substantial contributions of goods and services from friends was of great assistance.

Ministering to orphans was a major work of Sisters of Charity in the 19th century. (Painting by Pietro Gagliardi, courtesy Archives, Sisters of Charity of New York)

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9 *The Catholic Telegraph*, 20 December 1833.
10 Ibid.
Within a few years the Sisters were in need of a larger space for their ministries. In 1834 they moved to a different residence, but that soon proved too small, so in the spring of 1836, the bishop purchased a larger home at the corner of Third and Plum streets. By the end of the decade, 150 children attended St. Peter’s school, and approximately 50 orphans were under the care of the Sisters. They assumed an additional responsibility when they began supervising the newly organized Mary and Martha Society that offered services to the sick and indigent.11

Bishop Purcell sent an almost annual appeal to Emmitsburg, begging for additional Sisters to expand St. Peter’s, to take charge of the German orphan asylum, and to open a boarding school for girls in the city. In response three Sisters arrived to staff St. Aloysius German Orphan Asylum in 1842, but only three years later they were reassigned to other missions. This was the result of their superiors’ decision to withdraw Sisters on all missions from the care of boys. In New York City this change resulted in an open break with the Emmitsburg motherhouse and the formation of a diocesan community of Sisters of Charity in 1846.

Sister Margaret George arrived as the superior of St. Peter’s in 1845. A friend of Elizabeth Seton, she had entered the community in 1812 and had served on the governing council at Emmitsburg several times. In addition she had worked at schools and orphanages in

Emmitsburg, New York, Frederick (Maryland), Richmond and Boston. Later in the same year Sisters Eleazar (later Josephine) Harvey and Louis Regina (later Regina) Mattingly began their work in Cincinnati. These three women, along with Sister Anthony O’Connell, who had arrived in 1837, were destined to play important roles in the future of the Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati.

During the 1840s the number of orphans had nearly tripled, necessitating three additions to the physical plant. By mid-century St. Peter’s was serving more than 300 children, about half in the school, with the others in the orphanage.12 The number of Sisters on the mission increased to thirteen.

Meanwhile, in September 1849, the Sisters received notification that, unknown to them, their superiors at the Emmitsburg motherhouse had arranged to affiliate with the French-based Daughters of Charity. Some in Cincinnati, under the leadership of Sister Margaret George, met this change with resistance.

They chose not to renew their annual vows at the appointed time, protesting that they had joined an American community and felt called to continue in that spirit.

The next two years were tumultuous ones for the Sisters in Cincinnati. At times they were assured the affiliation with the Daughters of Charity would result in no changes of substance, while at others they received notification of significant changes. In September 1851, while attending a retreat for local superiors in Emmitsburg, Sister Margaret George voiced her concerns to the superiors, but to no avail.

Responding to the disquiet among the Sisters, in February 1852 Archbishop Purcell informed the superiors in Emmitsburg of his intention to establish a diocesan community of Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. In this way, he said, the Sisters could retain their habit, rules and traditions. He also expressed hope that “poor young girls of the diocese or in that section

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of the country, who had not the means of going to St. Joseph’s (Emmitsburg) might wish to join the remaining Sisters and thus their good works would be perpetuated.”

Of the thirteen Sisters stationed in Cincinnati at this time, seven chose to remain with the Emmitsburg community while the remaining six became the nucleus of the new foundation. Sister Margaret George continued as superior. With her, Sisters Josephine Harvey, Regina Mattingly, Anthony O'Connell, Sophia Gilmeyer and Antonia McCaffrey, made their vows March 25, 1852, as the first Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Within a few weeks Sister Gonzalva Doherty, who had previously been on mission in Cincinnati, arrived from St. Louis to join the newly formed group.

A novitiate was opened April 2, and by August, at the time of the first community retreat, there were nine professed Sisters, six novices and two candidates. In February 1853 the following Sisters were elected to lead the community:

- Sister Margaret George – Mother
- Sister Sophia Gilmeyer – Assistant Mother
- Sister Josephine Harvey – Treasurer and Secretary
- Sister Anthony O’Connell – Procuratrix (Business Manager)

13 *Mother Regina Smith and Mother Ann Simeon Morris*, (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1939), 89, 90.
The 1850s brought many changes for the new community. By the end of the decade there were 75 Sisters, and with increasing personnel, the Sisters were able to take on additional works of service. While continuing to operate St. Peter’s, they also opened the new St. Joseph’s Boys’ Orphan Asylum in 1852 near the new St. Peter’s Cathedral at Eighth and Plum streets. The archdiocese purchased land in Northside for a new orphanage site, and by 1855 orphans from both St. Joseph’s and St. Peter’s moved to a newly built facility which remained the site of St. Joseph’s Orphanage for more than 100 years.

The Sisters’ next endeavor was a Catholic hospital in Cincinnati. Archbishop John Purcell purchased a small facility at Broadway and Franklin streets in November 1852, naming it St. John’s Hotel for Invalides (later St. John’s Hospital) and enlisting the Sisters of Charity to operate it. Sister Sophia Gilmeyer led a group of five Sisters to inaugurate this work. Soon pressed for space, in 1855 the hospital moved to the building at Third and Plum streets vacated by the orphans. Patients were treated without charge or according to their means, and records of the period indicate that many stayed for months, relying on the charity of the Sisters for their care. The *Daily Commercial* offered the following report:

> At the present time the building is crowded to its utmost capacity by the sick, many of whom have come hundreds of miles to partake of its superior advantages. There are at the present time about seventy patients; to take care of whom there are ten sisters, who are presided over by one who is well known, wherever suffering is to be alleviated in our city – Sister Anthony. Of this secluded but noble woman we can say nothing, but that she is like Florence Nightingale. It is beautiful to see her pass around the sick, giving spiritual consolation to one, and bodily comfort to another – doing this constantly day and night, for no earthly reward or honor, for even her family name is not spoken.14

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In the fall of 1853 the Sisters purchased a home west of the city for a motherhouse and boarding academy. After enlarging the building, they proudly named it Mount Saint Vincent after their patron saint. The priests at nearby Mount St. Mary’s diocesan seminary served as additional teachers as well as chaplains at Mount St. Vincent while the Sisters took charge of domestic duties at the seminary.

By 1857 they outgrew their facility, and Mother Margaret George and the Council purchased an estate known as “The Cedars” located farther west on Price Hill. This property, which at the time included 33 acres, became the new Mount St. Vincent Motherhouse and Academy, affectionately called “Cedar Grove” after the Maryland home of Sister Sophia Gilmeyer. The original residence on the property was referred to as the “Cradle,” and within the year the cornerstone of a new five-story academy building was laid. *The Catholic Telegraph* commented that “the site of the new institution is very beautiful, and the locality one of the healthiest in the West.”

The Sisters expanded their work into other educational endeavors through the 1850s, operating several academies and parochial schools in downtown Cincinnati. In March 1858, in their first move outside the city, Sister Regina Mattingly and three other Sisters opened

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15 *The Catholic Telegraph*, 31 October 1857.
St. Mary’s Academy and St. Joseph’s parish school in Dayton, Ohio, and two years later the Sisters began teaching at St. Patrick’s in Fayetteville, Ohio.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, nursing services were in great demand, and Archbishop Purcell and Hon. George Hatch, the mayor of Cincinnati, appealed to the Sisters of Charity for personnel. In June 1861 six Sisters from Mount St. Vincent and St. John’s Hospital went to care for victims of a severe measles epidemic at Camp Dennison east of Cincinnati where about 12,000 men were encamped. Through the summer the Sisters walked in mud and water over their shoetops in heavy rain to attend to their duties. In early 1862 eight Sisters left for Cumberland, Maryland, where 2,200 soldiers in dire need of care were lodged in fourteen old warehouses.

From there the Sister-nurses moved with the army, serving on both the eastern and western fronts for the duration of the war. Thirty-three Sisters of Charity ministered on battlefields, on steamboats and flatboats, and in makeshift camp hospitals to soldiers of both sides. Commenting on the Battle of Shiloh, which resulted in more than 20,000 casualties, Sister Anthony O’Connell remarked, “The Sisters of Charity went to the war as nurses but it sometimes fell to their lot to be assistant surgeons.”

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In recognition of her outstanding work at Shiloh, Sister Anthony O’Connell was accorded the title “Angel of the Battlefield.” For her untiring services which won her a place in the hearts of many officers and soldiers, she was awarded membership in the Grand Army of the Republic and given a military funeral in 1897. In addition to their field service, the Sisters of Charity cared for wounded soldiers at St. John’s Hospital in Cincinnati where every bed was pressed into service.

Following the Civil War, the community accepted a new challenge when in 1865 Bishop John Lamy of the New Mexico Territory appealed for missionaries to open a hospital in Santa Fe. Of the many Sisters who volunteered, four pioneers were chosen to initiate this work. Known as “the hospital at the end of the Santa Fe Trail,” St. Vincent’s soon expanded beyond care for the sick to include an orphanage, an industrial school for girls, and care for the indigent poor. Since most of the people to whom they ministered were unable to pay for services, these brave Sisters supported themselves by begging at railroad and mining camps throughout the West, even as far as California. Several journals the Sisters kept narrate their adventures in facing the dangers of traveling on foot or in open wagons, over mountains, and across lonely plains and torrid deserts. They endured the threat of Indian attack as well as inhospitable reception at the camps, but they persevered in their mission. The most famous

When this 1882 addition to St. Vincent’s Sanitarium in Santa Fe, N.M., was completed, it was the tallest building in the city.
of these journals, *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*, narrates Sister Blandina Segale’s 20-year sojourn in Trinidad, Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Amid the many challenges of language, culture and environment, the Sisters’ work flourished, and soon others joined them.

In 1870 a mission was accepted in the small mining town of Trinidad, Colorado, where four Sisters opened a school amid rugged frontier conditions. Within the decade Archbishop Henry Elder of Cincinnati proposed that the Western missions separate from the Cincinnati motherhouse because of the difficulties of governance at so great a distance. Protests from the Sisters themselves ended that consideration. Instead, to bolster their isolated forces on the Western frontier, superiors opened schools in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Denver, Colorado, and accepted an invitation to open St. Mary’s Hospital in Pueblo, Colorado.

Meanwhile in Cincinnati, Mr. Joseph Butler, a local banker, sent an acquaintance to St. John’s Hospital for treatment, promising to pay all expenses. When he called to inquire about the bill, Sister Anthony replied, “That poor sick man was taken in here for the love of God and we give him no bills for our work.” Deeply impressed, Butler and a friend, Louis Worthington, bought the 95-bed former U.S. Marine Hospital at Sixth and Lock streets and presented the deed to Sister Anthony on her birthday in 1866, requesting that the name be changed to The Hospital of the Good Samaritan in honor of Sister Anthony’s charity.

Within months of moving to the new location, Sister Anthony, now the administrator, began offering services to the aged and to destitute unwed mothers and their babies. Pressed for space to continue this work, she appealed to her friend Joseph Butler for assistance. He responded by purchasing an estate on the outskirts of the city where St. Joseph Infant Asylum opened September 11, 1873. The work only slowly gained support, so as a means of sustenance the Sisters and residents washed laces for the wealthy ladies of Clifton and Avondale. Later a donation from

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18 Sisters of Charity who kept journals of their experiences in the 19th century in Colorado and New Mexico include Sister Catherine Mallon, Sister Fidelis McCarthy and Sister Blandina Segale whose journal was published as *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*.

19 McCann, Vol II, 283.

20 Ibid., 61.
philanthropist Reuben Springer allowed for substantial enlargement of the buildings and grounds. Now known as St. Joseph Home, the facility relocated to Sharonville, Ohio, in the late 1960s. Meeting the changing needs of the times, it serves profoundly mentally and physically handicapped children.

Good Samaritan Hospital continued to operate at Sixth and Lock streets until space and the condition of the neighborhood became a problem. The Sisters acquired property in the Clifton suburb where they built a new facility. The first wing opened in 1915 with additional space added as finances and needs permitted. To the present day Good Samaritan Hospital continues to be a leading medical facility in Cincinnati.

Growth in the number of parochial schools in the latter part of the 19th century consumed a large portion of the Sisters’ energies. They staffed schools in many parts of Ohio, and in 1872 the first of many Sisters were sent to teach in Michigan schools. Requests for teachers came from all over the country. “One day’s mail alone carried reluctant refusals to Knoxville and Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Cynthiana, Kentucky, to Marshall, Michigan, to Newark and Middletown, Ohio.” Between 1860 and the end of the century, the Sisters of Charity assumed responsibility for 76 elementary and secondary schools. Their locations became familiar names in the community atlas as Sisters were missioned to such places as Au Sable, Alpina, Bay City, Grand Rapids and Lansing, Michigan; to Hamilton, Springfield, Piqua, Sidney, Xenia and Cleveland, Ohio; to San Miguel and Albuquerque, New Mexico; and to Pueblo and Denver, Colorado. In addition the names of many parish schools in Cincinnati joined the community lexicon: St. Lawrence, St. Boniface, St. Gabriel, Holy Family and Holy Cross among others.
The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati also were called upon to assist in the founding of other congregations of Elizabeth Seton’s daughters. During the late 1850s when Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, nephew of Elizabeth Seton, decided to begin a Sisters of Charity congregation in his Newark, New Jersey, diocese, he sent five candidates to Cincinnati to be trained under the tutelage of Mother Margaret George. After a year they returned to become the nucleus of the new foundation. Bishop Bayley’s wish that Mother Margaret George return with them to serve as the first superior was not granted. Both Bishop Purcell and the Cincinnati Sisters were adamant that she remain to guide their community. In lieu of this, two Sisters from the New York Sisters of Charity went to assist the New Jersey community.

In 1870 the Cincinnati community was again instrumental in the establishment of a branch of Sisters of Charity, this time in western Pennsylvania. Bishop Michael Domenec of Pittsburgh sent four young women to participate in the Cincinnati novitiate. When they completed their formation, these Sisters, accompanied by six Cincinnati Sisters, returned to establish the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill with its motherhouse in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Sisters Aloysia Lowe and Ann Regina Ennis, both Cincinnati Sisters, became Mother and Director of Novices and eventually transferred to the new congregation. In time the other four Cincinnati Sisters returned to Mount St. Vincent.

During the 1870s the city of Cincinnati was growing rapidly. Price Hill, the location of Mount St. Vincent, was annexed; the Price Hill Incline was built and the Cincinnati Street Railway extended a line to the entrance of Mount St. Vincent. The Sisters were under mounting pressure from real estate developers to sell some of their now-56 acres for residential development. With the area around Cedar Grove losing its rural setting, they were already considering another location.

In 1869 the Sisters had purchased farm property in Delhi Township, five miles west of Cedar Grove. They had added a frame wing to the brick farmhouse, named it Saint Joseph’s, and moved the novitiate there under the care of Mother Josephine Harvey. A young professor at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Price Hill, Rev. Thomas Byrne, served as chaplain, making the six-mile trip each day on horseback or in an open buggy.
The friendships he forged during those years made him a loyal ally and generous benefactor of the community. In later years he was named the first bishop of Nashville, Tennessee, but according to his wish, he was buried near his friends in the cemetery at Mount St. Joseph.

By the early 1880s additional property adjacent to St. Joseph’s was purchased, and the Sisters began to plan a new motherhouse. Half of the Mount St. Vincent property in Price Hill was sold to secure funds for the new construction. By May 1884 the center and west wings of the new “Stone House” were completed, and the motherhouse transferred to Mount St. Joseph. By the following year plans were in progress for the addition of an east wing. Work began in June, but on the night of July 16, fire destroyed the entire building. The inadequacy of the water supply and the inability of fire engines to climb the steep hill on which the motherhouse was located sealed the fate of the building. Within days, however, reconstruction work began, and by July 1886 a new brick structure known as Marian Hall was ready for occupancy.
The center and east wings of Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse as well as St. Mary’s Hall were completed the following decade, but the crown jewel of the new motherhouse, the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, remained a shell until the Sisters were able to raise money to complete it. It was dedicated in 1901 and consecrated four years later. Romanesque in design, the chapel's outstanding features included a large mural by Wilhelm Lamprecht and a basilica altar designed in Italy. Four stories in height and seating more than 500 people, it was considered by some as too large for the needs of the community. Thus, it was referred to as “Byrne’s Folly” because Rev. Thomas Byrne, the chaplain, had urged that it take on its grand proportions.

With additional space at Mount St. Joseph, the Sisters opened St. Aloysius boarding academy for boys in 1891. The school remained at the Mount until 1906 when it moved to Fayetteville, Ohio, twice operating as a military academy before closing in 1953. When the boys were relocated, Mount St. Joseph Academy for girls opened at the Mount. By the early twentieth century Mount St. Joseph with its imposing structure and grounds was a well-known landmark. Besides the educational programs the Sisters offered, the Motherhouse served as home for Sisters of Charity as they received their religious training, pursued professional education, made retreats, and ventured forth to a variety of places around the globe.

The years between 1887 and 1902 saw a surge in Sister of Charity activity in the health care field. Much of the impetus for the establishment of hospitals and sanitariums came from clergy and doctors who encouraged the congregation to expand its ministry in their locales. From the time of their arrival in Albuquerque in 1880, the Sisters had welcomed the sick at their 18-room adobe Wayfarer’s House in Old Town. Later in the decade there was a short-lived attempt to open a hospital in the school buildings at St. Vincent Academy. Soon local Jesuits offered the Sisters land in the northern heights for another attempt, and by 1902 St. Joseph’s Sanitarium was in operation although local citizens feared that the hospital was too far from town to be successful. Their concern was soon allayed when generous friends donated a horse and buggy so the Sisters could more easily conduct their business. St. Joseph’s quickly expanded to
include a general hospital, and it continues to serve the Albuquerque area, though under new ownership.

Two hospital endeavors were begun in 1889. One, in Lansing, Michigan, quickly proved unable to support itself. The second in Trinidad, where the Sisters were already well established at St. Joseph Academy, was more successful. Sister Catherine Mallon, one of the pioneers of the Western missions, was sent to take charge of a hospital “not yet built.” Although the foundation was laid, this veteran beggar was compelled, once again, to make the rounds of the neighboring railroad and mining camps to solicit funds for the new establishment, Mount San Rafael.

In Colorado Springs the Albert Glockner Memorial, which had been in operation for several years, was donated to the Sisters of Charity in 1893. With rates at $1.00 per day and half of the patients receiving free care, the sanitarium proved too much of a financial drain for the Sisters to maintain. In 1900 Sister Rose Alexis Broderick was sent to oversee the sale of the institution. Instead, she won new friends who supported its continuation. Within a remarkably short time it became a thriving facility and remains so today as Penrose St. Francis Hospital.

A nine-room residence in Kenton, Ohio, became the first site of Hospital Antonio in 1897. The founder and local pastor successfully petitioned the Sisters of Charity, who were already teaching in the city, to assume management of the hospital. The following year the Sisters received a request from Mount Clemens, Michigan, the site of several sanitariums. A local clergyman, noting that none of the existing facilities were under Catholic auspices, encouraged the Sisters to operate what became St. Joseph’s. It soon expanded to include general medical services for the area.
Also in 1898 Sister Agnes Regina Browne, administrator of St. Joseph Infant Home in Cincinnati, opened a downtown office in the West End to facilitate the Home’s outreach. Soon the neighboring Eclectic Medical School proposed that the Sisters open a hospital at their site that the school would staff. This facility was named Seton Hospital and operated in the neighborhood until 1925 when its services merged with Good Samaritan Hospital.

A school of nursing was a part of nearly every Sister of Charity hospital. In their early years these schools provided intensive on-the-job training supplemented with evening lectures. Gradually, as nursing education changed its focus, classroom education supported by clinical experience became the norm. The first Sister of Charity-sponsored school opened in 1893 at Mount San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad, followed closely by the Good Samaritan School of Nursing in Cincinnati. Each of the schools gained certification from accrediting agencies and accreditation by state nursing boards as these agencies developed criteria. Perhaps the most outstanding Sister of Charity nurse-educator was Sister Cyril Mahrt who in 1933 consolidated three Colorado schools into the Seton School of Nursing. She was recognized as a national leader in nursing education because of her innovative approaches, her speaking skills, and her years of service to state and national boards and nursing organizations.

As the nineteenth century neared its end, the community became involved in work with Italian immigrants in Cincinnati. Sisters Blandina Segale and Justina Segale, Italian immigrants themselves, were commissioned to attend to both the spiritual and physical needs of their people. The feisty
Sister Blandina had already made a name for herself through her work in Colorado and New Mexico. Now she and her more soft-spoken sister organized the Santa Maria Italian Educational and Institutional Home. The first Catholic settlement house in the United States, their agency became the foundation for an Archdiocesan social service program. The Sisters who worked at Santa Maria cast a wide net in their outreach programs. They organized a volunteer network and established collaborative relationships throughout the city that allowed them to serve the needs of many poor and unfortunate people. Their work included catechetics, visits to homes, hospitals and jails, emergency relief, a home for orphan girls, a temporary home for stranded working girls, an employment bureau, a domestic service department, a kindergarten, a day nursery, sewing classes, a boys’ club, a girls’ club, Sunday schools, and even the establishment of an Italian parish.

Always expanding, by the 1940s Santa Maria’s services were offered to Appalachian and black migrants arriving in Cincinnati. In addition Sister-social workers were assigned to the diocesan-sponsored school social service program to assist underprivileged and disabled children. Santa Maria became independent of the Sisters of Charity in 1972 and continues as a vital social service agency offering many diverse programs.

The Sisters of Charity took responsibility for staffing St. Rita School for the Deaf in 1915. Although the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur began the work of deaf education, when Archbishop Henry Moeller decided to open a boarding school for these children, the Sisters of Charity took on this work. Sister Mary Lewine Pluckebaum did...
preparatory studies in St. Louis, and upon her return she became an integral part of St. Rita’s as a teacher, dorm supervisor and housekeeper for 47 years. She is fondly remembered for her inspiring influence on pupils of every age. Sisters of Charity continued to serve at St. Rita’s for many years, some dedicating almost their entire active ministry to this work.

In their association with St. Rita’s, the Sisters of Charity assisted in the formation of a society for deaf and hard of hearing women religious, the Pius Union of Our Lady of Good Counsel, who centered their ministry at St. Rita’s. However, in 1930 when the Pius Union was unable to continue as an independent group, Archbishop John McNicholas asked Mother Irenaea Fahey to accept any Pius Union members who wished to become Sisters of Charity. Thirty-nine women joined, many continuing their dedicated ministry at St. Rita’s until their retirement.

The Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 offered the Sisters of Charity new opportunities to serve. As in the Civil War, the Sisters volunteered in various locales. With schools closed due to the numbers stricken, many Sisters did home nursing and assisted in local hospitals. In addition some traveled to rural mining areas in Colorado and Kentucky. A citation from the United States Fuel Administration lauded their service:

The Sisters came into the eastern Kentucky coal fields at a time when conditions resulting from the epidemic were at their worst, and when efforts to secure doctors and nurses were seemingly fruitless . . . Long and faithfully the Sisters worked, putting their lives in jeopardy daily, going from house to house, nursing the sick, irrespective of creed or nationality, alleviating conditions, aiding the neglected, doing work of the most humble character, going to bedsides where many others had refused to venture, and giving their services without compensation, other than the consciousness of duty well-performed.  

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In this post World War I era, women were seeking opportunities for higher education as they prepared to move into a more active role in society. In response to this development, the Sisters of Charity established the College of Mount St. Joseph-on-the-Ohio for women in 1920. The College on the grounds of the Motherhouse, granted its first degrees in 1924, and soon plans were in progress to add a building to the campus to accommodate an increasing enrollment. When Seton Hall opened in 1927, it included a library, classrooms, laboratories, offices and state-of-the-art residence facilities. During its early decades the Sisters of Charity faculty and staff were the backbone of the College. One in particular, Sister Maria Corona Molloy, rendered invaluable service from the founding of the institution until her retirement in 1967. In the early years she was both mathematics professor and registrar, but she is best remembered for her 26-year tenure as “the Dean.” In her final position as president, she planned and oversaw the building of a new 75-acre campus southeast of the Motherhouse. This eleven-building complex increased the facilities fivefold. In more recent years the college became co-educational and continues to expand its programs and facilities to meet current demands.

The 1920s also brought important internal changes to the community. The decision to become a Papal Congregation meant a change in habit and Constitutions. No longer the “black caps,” the Sisters of Charity adopted a more elaborate white cap over which was draped a long black veil. They also began the practice of professing perpetual vows, a change from the annual vows that had been the custom since 1813 when Elizabeth Ann Seton and the first Sisters of Charity made their vows.
By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Sisters of Charity were operating or staffing a number of elementary schools in Ohio and Michigan, as well as in Colorado and New Mexico. With the growing number of students seeking more education, many parishes began commercial or four-year high schools as extensions of their elementary programs. Eventually, most of these schools were consolidated into centralized high schools. In the Cincinnati archdiocese, Archbishop John McNicholas, O.P., established an archdiocesan high school system in the late 1920s. To accommodate his plan, Mount St. Vincent Academy closed, and in 1927, the facility became Seton High School, a diocesan girls’ school serving the western part of the city. A beautiful new facility was erected in the 1950s to replace the original Cedar Grove buildings, and more recently the school completed a major renovation and building project. This together with dedicated faculty have enabled the school to continue to serve in the long tradition which began in 1854 with the opening of Mount St. Vincent.

Responding to the needs of the Church, the Sisters of Charity accepted a request for Sisters to take charge of a small hospital in China. “Who among you are able and willing to go to China, to take care of the poor sick...” was Mother Irenaea Fahey’s November 1926 appeal to the community. Nearly 200 volunteers responded from whom six were chosen.

Civil war in China postponed their departure, but in January 1928 the Sisters left Mount St. Joseph. Their destination was Wuchang, six hundred miles up the Yangtze River from the port city of Shanghai. Upon their arrival the Sisters assumed operation of a small hospital poorly suited for medical purposes. Eventually, St. Joseph’s Hospital, a two-story building accommodating 75 patients, was constructed. Besides the hospital
the Sisters’ work included caring for the aged and later widened to encompass an orphanage, school, nurses’ training school and dispensary. By the early 1930s Chinese women began joining the community. The earliest candidates journeyed to Mount St. Joseph for their novitiate, but beginning in 1934, a novitiate was opened in Wuchang. In 1937 a new orphanage was built in San Kiang Kow, a city farther upstream.

The Japanese invasion, limited supplies and threats of bombings seriously affected the Sisters’ work throughout the 1930s. In one instance two Japanese bombs landed on the Sisters’ compound, severely damaging the hospital complex. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese declared all American missionaries prisoners. The Sisters, at first confined on their own compound, suffered many harrowing and humiliating experiences. In 1943 the American Sisters, along with other missionaries, were interned in Shanghai. The Chinese Sisters, meanwhile, heroically continued to operate the hospital. At the end of the war, the Sisters were reunited and able to return to their work despite continuing hostilities between the Nationalist Chinese and the Communists. By 1949 it was evident that the Communists would prevail, and all of the Sisters were recalled to the Motherhouse. Among the group that sailed to the United States were 19 Chinese Sisters and postulants. Their hopes of someday returning to their homeland were frustrated by subsequent historical events, and only in recent decades have they been able to re-establish ties with their families in China.

With the passing years the community’s membership grew. By 1925 there were nearly 1,000 members. During the Great Depression, when many parishes could pay no salaries, the Sisters did without like everyone else.
By 1944 the number of Sisters had grown to 1,200. In the post-World War II era, as Catholics began to migrate to the suburbs, many new schools were opened, which led to numerous requests for Sisters. In addition teaching in Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and summer religion programs became tasks the Sisters assumed in many locales. By the late 1950s, more than 800 Sisters of Charity were engaged in educational ministry, and by the 1960s the community grew to 1,600 members.

In the medical field the Sisters opened Good Samaritan Hospital in Dayton, Ohio, in 1931 and engaged in discussions about opening several other hospitals. As health care delivery expanded in the post-World War II years, Sisters of Charity-sponsored hospitals expanded or replaced their aging facilities. Financing became more complex as construction costs rose and federal assistance and foundation grants became available. Under the leadership of Sister Elise Halleran, treasurer of the community and a financial and management expert, the hospitals reorganized to meet the changing situation. Local advisory boards were established and a centralized approach to operating the hospitals was introduced, including centralized programs in capital construction financing, insurance, employee benefits, purchasing and shared services.

The community assumed several new ministries in Colorado during the 1940s. In Denver Mrs. Verner Reed arranged for the Sisters of Charity to take over the Margery Reed Day Nursery. At the same time Mrs. Julie Penrose donated her beautiful home, El Pomar, located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado Springs, to the Sisters of Charity to be used as the first Catholic women’s retreat center west of the Mississippi River. The ministry at El Pomar, later called Julie Penrose Center, continued for more than half a century, providing enriching programs for thousands of visitors.

After World War II the Sisters of Charity were invited to staff Villa Nazareth Orphanage for boys in Rome, Italy. The vision of Cardinal Domenico Tardini, founder of Villa Nazareth, was to provide a home and education for gifted young boys, preparing them to become Christian leaders for Italy. For nearly two decades the Sisters taught and nurtured these young men, and because of Cardinal Tardini’s Vatican positions, they were often called upon to entertain distinguished visitors. To this day a strong bond
exists between the men who grew up at Villa Nazareth and the Sisters who ministered there.

Through the decades Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse underwent many changes. A fire in 1937 destroyed the boiler room, kitchen and bath house attached to the rear of the chapel. St. Vincent Hall, containing residence space, offices and a new kitchen and bakery replaced these facilities. At the same time a free-standing boiler room-laundry building was constructed. In 1947 Mother Mary Zoe Farrell announced the construction of Mother Margaret Hall on the Motherhouse grounds. This six-story structure with 140 private rooms became home for the aged and infirm Sisters and even some Sisters' relatives. Remodeled several times, this facility continues to offer both nursing and assisted living services for the Sisters.

Substantial changes also occurred for those beginning their lives as Sisters of Charity. Concern for the proper spiritual and professional preparation of young Sisters became an issue for all American religious congregations. The traditional two-year novitiate was deemed inadequate by the church-wide Sister Formation Movement. Supporting this movement, the Sisters of Charity made every effort to extend the formation period for as many Sisters as feasible despite the demands to staff the exploding number of parochial schools. By the late 1950s many young Sisters stayed at the Mount for two years beyond their novitiate, coming close to completing their college degrees while at the same time receiving a better foundation in theology and religious life.

In the 1950s Pope Pius XII urged religious communities to make adjustments in their religious habits and lifestyles in order to minister more effectively. The Sisters of Charity followed his suggestions, simplifying their black habits, allowing Sisters to drive automobiles, and changing some of their practices. These adjustments proved to be only the beginning of dramatic changes that resulted from the directives issued by the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Religious communities were urged to use the Gospel as their model, return to the original charism (spirit) of their founder(s), and study the signs of the times. Based on this approach, every community was directed to hold a special chapter and to rewrite their Constitutions.
The Sisters of Charity, like other congregations, began a reassessment of ministry, lifestyle, governance and sponsorship of institutions, using questionnaires and discussion groups to insure Sisters’ participation in decision-making. Some of the most significant changes involved the option to wear contemporary dress, the opportunity for a Sister to choose her place of ministry, and individual choice in living arrangements. All of these changes were designed to better fulfill the community’s mission in the contemporary world. Application of the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity, stressed by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, led to more participatory government, personal freedom and individual responsibility. Given the sweeping nature of the changes, tension and turmoil resulted in a decline in the number of members as Sisters re-examined their commitments. At the same time, as social changes led to more options for women, fewer entered religious life.
Beginning in the 1970s, the Sisters began to invite others to join them in carrying out their mission and spirit through their Associate programs. The Associates in Mission, initiated in 1973, invites friends and co-workers to participate through shared prayer and community activities. This program has steadily grown, recently celebrating its 35th anniversary. Associates in Volunteer Ministry commit themselves to a year of volunteer service with the Sisters of Charity, and Associates in Community both live with Sisters and work at a Sisters of Charity ministry site.

In other developments the Sisters evaluated their congregationally sponsored ministries and reviewed their individual ministries in light of their particular talents as well as the changing needs of Church and society. Some chose new fields of work, including parish ministry, direct service to the poor, community development work, and as self-employed professionals.

In response to the Church’s call for missionaries to Latin America, one-third of eligible Sisters of Charity responded to Mother Mary Omer Downing’s request for volunteers in 1960. After cultural training in Mexico, the first four Sister of Charity missionaries opened a school and clinic on the altiplano in Peru. Others followed, working both in the Andes Mountains and in the city of Lima for more than 35 years. During the 1970s a group of Sisters worked in Malawi, Africa, while others served in diverse areas of the world as staff for Catholic relief agencies. Additionally, Sisters served in other South and Central American countries.

As a professor, supervisor of research, and chair of the biology department at the College of Mount St. Joseph, S. Annette Muckerheide continues the work of higher education.
Some Sisters remained in elementary, secondary and college classrooms while others moved into adult education and retreat work. Some served as directors of religious education in parishes and in positions focused on social justice education. In addition the Congregation continued to reach a large audience through its sponsored ministries and its publications.

Responding to dramatic changes in health care, the Sisters of Charity, under the leadership of Sister Grace Marie Hiltz, created the Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems (SCHCS) in 1979. This comprehensive, integrated structure was expanded during the 1980s when it welcomed hospitals sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis of Colorado Springs. Although successful at the time, the need for further consolidation led SCHCS to join with other Catholic health care systems in the formation in 1996 of Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI), one of the largest not-for-profit health organizations in the United States. Sisters also continued to offer health services in rural, inner-city and parish settings.

In recent years the community has chosen to focus on ministry initiatives for women, children and the elderly. Eldermount Adult Day Program began in 1985, and Bayley Place Retirement Center opened in 1990. In more recent years The Village at Bayley Place and the Wellness Center have been added to services offered to senior citizens on a campus adjacent to the Motherhouse. Other new ministries focus on women and children. Seton Family Center and The Women’s Connection in Cincinnati, La Clinica Guadalupana in El Paso, Texas and Service Empowerment Transformation (SET) with offices in Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Colorado, and Albuquerque, New Mexico, are examples. The Sisters also have chosen to be active in corporate ministries such as responsible education.
Students from Holy Family School visit Mother Margaret Hall nursing facility at Mount St. Joseph and perform a play for the Sisters. Sisters help the students prepare for the play by making masks and coaching them with their lines. S. Brenda Busch, principal, and S. Peggy Rein are pictured with the students.

investing monitored by the Corporate Responsibility Committee, alternative investments made through the Seton Enablement Fund, and grant-making for ministry initiatives that serve the poor though SC Ministry Foundation.

An increasing awareness of the need for collaboration led to the strengthening of ties with other communities through participation in the Sisters of Charity Federation. Begun in 1947 by the six congregations founded by Elizabeth Seton, the organization’s membership has expanded to include congregations who claim a Vincentian-Setonian heritage. It offers Sisters opportunities for educational and renewal programs and strengthens the ties of those sharing similar interests and spirit.

The new culture and climate that developed in recent decades has resulted in new ways for Sisters and Associates to come together in community. Committees, small group meetings and discussion sessions have given each person an opportunity to help shape decisions for the group. Community-wide celebrations and periodic homecomings have provided important ways of being together and have renewed the spirit and focus of the members. The 1975 canonization of Elizabeth Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity, was a time of affirmation and jubilation, as were periodic commemorations of significant anniversaries in the community’s history.
In 2004 the Sisters of Charity welcomed Vincentian Sisters of Charity from Bedford, Ohio, as members. The lengthy process of discussion and discernment engaged in by members of both communities was affirmed by unanimous votes to merge the two communities. The expanded community has been a source of richness for all.

For 200 years thousands of Sisters of Charity have devoted their lives to the service of others. In the 1830s they conducted orphanages and schools; by the 1850s they had begun ministries in health care; they worked with immigrants, the poor, and the handicapped as varying situations dictated. Works of the community have remained constant as the Sisters have sought to meet the physical, social, cultural and religious needs of those they serve. In the early days the Sisters’ work was directed toward a small, poor, immigrant church. Later, as the Catholic population assimilated into American society, the Sisters refocused their services. Now, in contemporary times, the Sisters of Charity continue to meet new challenges in order to faithfully live their mission and carry on the tradition of their foremothers.

Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati merge with the Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Bedford, Ohio, in 2004.
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati
Vision Statement:

Because we Sisters of Charity dwell in this house of love and encounter God, we commit ourselves to this Vision Statement:

As a community of charity, living the gospel as expressed in the charism of Elizabeth Seton and Margaret George we will strive to be persons who:

• choose to live simply in a complex world committed to the healing of our global home

• embrace cultural expansion in membership and ministry

• learn from and are in solidarity with the poor

• risk being prophetic in church and society

• journey together toward wholeness

We make this commitment imbued with a deep faith in the active presence of God and strengthened by prayer, friendship and community.