



The Sisters Knew A CHILD NEEDS A HOME

BY SUZY FARREN

Throughout U.S. history, religious orders have provided for society's most vulnerable, and as Mary Anne Graf notes in her introduction to the special section for this issue, the most vulnerable, both in the past and today, are often children. Today there are hospitals all over the country, including Catholic hospitals, devoted to meeting the health needs of children. But that was not always the case. From the 18th century through the first part of the 20th — a harsh time in our history for many, especially immigrants — religious sisters concerned themselves not only with children's health, but with children's well-being. They came to this country to start ministries, looked into the faces of abandoned boys and girls, and opened their arms to them.

The stories that follow are representative, not inclusive. But first, to set the stage:

THREADS OF FEELING

The Industrial Revolution changed England forever. Technological breakthroughs meant factories could mass-produce goods; the economy boomed; and the promise of factory jobs drew workers from rural areas to the cities. As cities grew, so did

crowded, disease-ridden slums for the new urban poor.

In 1739, the London Foundling Hospital opened to take in abandoned babies. The parent, most frequently the mother, was instructed to leave a small token as a means of identification should she seek to reclaim the child she had given up. Typically, the token was a scrap torn from a piece of clothing and pinned to the baby's wrappings. Upon admitting a

foundling, institutional practice was to attach the scrap to a registration form and preserve them in a ledger. Once full, the ledger was stored away. Year after year, these ledgers accumulated on shelves.

In the early 21st century, the ledgers were retrieved and the tiny pieces of fabric gathered for

In the mid-1800s in New York City, it is estimated that half of all children under the age of 5 died each year.

a 2010 museum show in London called “Threads of Feeling.” The fabric tokens represent the single largest collection of 18th century everyday textiles in Great Britain and quite possibly in the world.¹

That these scraps add up to so significant a piece of textile history speaks, in part, to the vast numbers of children who became foundlings. The little fabric tokens tell of desperate times, innumerable stories lost to history and of a recognized social and moral calling to care for children.

Similarly, the calling to care for children amounts to a footnote in many a congregational history book. While some congregations of women religious came together for such a mission, in many cases caring for orphans and abandoned children was tangential to main ministries. The sisters recognized a social and moral need and opened orphan homes, then closed them when the need was gone.

As a result, we will never know the scope of the sisters’ contributions. In some cases, there is no record at all — not even a scrap of fabric.

THE EARLY YEARS

The Ursuline nuns are credited with opening in 1729 the first orphanage in territory that would later become the United States. They took in the children of settlers killed in an attack by a Native American tribe.² In 1817, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, who would become the first American saint, sent three Sisters of Charity to New York City to open a home for dependent children. In 1828, the Sisters of Charity arrived in St. Louis, where they opened first a hospital and then an orphanage. The following year they opened an orphanage in Cincinnati. By 1846 they operated three homes for children in New York and had opened orphanages and other institutions in cities all along the East Coast that were seeing huge influxes of immigrants.³

The vast migration of European immigrants to the United States in the 19th century reflected

their hunger for a better life: for food, land, jobs and religious and political freedom. Conditions in American cities and on the frontier could be harsh. As immigrants wrote home to describe their lives, Catholic priests in the homeland would hear of the suffering and dispatch small groups of nuns to help the faithful in these American communities by establishing a school or a hospital.

And so it was that these Catholic sisters joined one of the great migrations of history. Enduring the harsh sea crossing and arriving with little money, the sisters most often set out by train to the places where they were to establish their ministries. Frequently one of the first needs they identified was caring for abandoned children.

The sisters did what they could. In addition to establishing the ministries for which they had been summoned, they began to take in orphans because they could not turn their backs.

THE ORPHAN TRAINS

In the mid-1800s in New York City, it is estimated that half of all children under the age of 5 died each year.⁴ Many who survived were abandoned by parents who could not afford to keep them. Thousands of children roamed the streets of New York in search of money, food and shelter, often forming gangs to protect themselves. The few orphanages that existed were filled to the breaking point.

In 1854, a young minister, Charles Loring Brace, was so distressed by the hoards of street children that he set out to do something. He determined that the best thing would be to send the children as far away from New York City as possible, preferably to homes in the country. Thus began the orphan trains.

For the orphan trains, street children were rounded up, washed, given some decent clothing and sent west on the railroad to towns where families had agreed to take some of them in. When the train arrived, often in a rural community where children represented extra hands on the farm, the orphans would disembark and gather in a public place to be looked over. If chosen, the child would go off to his or her new destiny.⁵

The Sisters of Charity became involved in this outplacement through the New York Foundling Hospital, which they had opened in 1869. So great were the numbers of foundlings in those years after the Civil War that the sisters launched their own version of the orphan trains. The sisters contacted priests in the South and the Midwest to identify Catholic families who sought a child.



The priest would communicate the family's specifications to the sisters (boy or girl, age, hair color, etc.), who would do their best to match the child to the request. When the child arrived by train, the family would sign a receipt which would be returned to the sisters.⁶

By 1884, more than 60,000 children had been relocated throughout the United States. Estimates are that more than half of them were not orphans, but had at least one parent still living who was unable to care for them. In 1887, Michigan became the first state to enact legislation controlling the placement of children, requiring foster homes be investigated before the children were placed. And by 1929, the orphan train movement had pretty much come to an end.⁷

THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES

Some congregations of sisters opened orphanages as an adjunct to a school or hospital to fill a community need. Other congregations viewed the care of orphans as their primary calling. One of the latter was the Marianites of Holy Cross, who arrived from France in 1847 to work with the Holy Cross Brothers in New Orleans. The sisters found deplorable conditions. Their only source of funds was what they took in begging each day. By 1851, the sisters cared for 200 boys — by themselves, because the brothers had withdrawn. Soon they began taking in abandoned girls as well. St. Mary's Orphanage survived the Civil War, epidemics and the influenza pandemic of 1918. It closed in 1932 when the children were moved to a new facility opened by Catholic Charities.⁸

Elizabeth Greiveldinger, a native of Luxembourg, set about establishing an orphanage and home for the elderly in Tiffin, Ohio in 1868. Despite the fact that she had two daughters, an elderly father and an orphan boy whom she was rearing, Elizabeth sold the family farm to finance the initiative. Working with a local priest, she founded St. Francis Home and Orphanage. When she died in 1893 as Mother Francis d'Assisi, superior of the Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin, the facility cared for 160 orphans and 50 elderly persons.⁹

The Franciscan Sisters of the Holy Family opened one of the first orphanages in Iowa in 1875. They put the vast majority of their resources into caring for the children, and the sisters themselves

subsisted on less than 3 cents a day apiece. In nearby Wisconsin, the Felician Sisters opened 10 orphanages beginning in 1874. Their early ministries served immigrants and their orphaned children.¹⁰

It is not widely known that Mother Mary Odilia Berger was an unwed mother. Founder of the congregation now known as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, Mother Odilia hailed from Germany, where she left her illegitimate daughter in an orphanage while she attempted to form a religious congregation. The girl died there at the age of 11. Mother Odilia went on to nurse soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War and later founded several orphanages in St. Louis in the 1870s. Her congregation's primary ministry was nursing the sick, and the orphanages existed only as long as there was a need.¹¹

STORIES OF CELEBRATED SISTERS

Although most sisters provided care behind the scenes, there were some Catholic women religious who have become celebrated for their contributions.

A statue of Mother Joseph of the Sisters of Providence stands in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol. It is inscribed, "She made monumental contributions to health care, education, and social work throughout the Northwest."

In 1856, Mother Joseph led a group of four other sisters on a month-long journey from Montreal to the Pacific Northwest. The sisters traveled by ship down the Eastern Seaboard to Panama, took a train across the isthmus, then boarded a ship to take them up the West Coast. When they finally arrived at Fort Vancouver, one of the first things



Mother Joseph of the Sisters of Providence and another sister, with guides. Mother Joseph built homes for abandoned children in the Northwest.

they did was welcome a 3-year-old and an infant into their home. After that came a steady stream of orphans. In the many years of her ministry, Mother Joseph built and furnished several houses for abandoned children, along with hospitals and schools throughout the Northwest.¹²

Among the most compelling stories is that of Mother Marianne Cope, a Sister of St. Francis of Syracuse, N.Y., who accepted a request to come to Hawaii to help care for victims of Hansen's disease. Known at the time as leprosy, the disfiguring disease was feared and poorly understood.

Hawaii had a leper colony on the island of Molokai where victims of the disease were permanently isolated. Among those most desperately in need were the lepers' healthy children, who ran wild in packs after their parents died. In 1885,

Each sister took clothesline and tied 10 orphans to her body. They sang "Queen of the Waves" to calm the children's fears.

Mother Marianne opened a home in Honolulu for healthy girls with leper parents, and in 1888, she opened the Bishop Home for Unprotected Leper Girls and Women on Molokai. In 1889, she took over a similar home for boys when its founder, Father Damien, who ministered to the lepers on Molokai, died of the disease.

Mother Marianne did what she could to bring dignity to the lives of the suffering. She grew fruit and vegetables to provide nourishing food, and she landscaped the area to provide beauty. She dressed the lepers in stylish clothing, restoring to them a sense of worth. She remained on Molokai until her death in 1918 at the age of 80.¹³

Mother Cabrini is one of the most famous of Catholic sisters, as she was the first U.S. citizen to achieve sainthood. Born in Italy, she came to New York City in 1889 and began her work in the U.S. teaching orphaned Italian girls. In her 67 years, Mother Cabrini founded 67 institutions all across the United States, including a number of orphanages. She seemed to have a special place in her heart for children. On a visit to Chicago in December 1917, she learned that the 500 children at her school would not have their usual Christmas candy because of war shortages. She insisted that the sisters find candy somewhere, and, despite feeling weak, she helped pack the 500 boxes. It was one of her last acts. She died two days later at the age of 67.¹⁴

Mother Mary Baptist Russell arrived in San

Francisco with seven other Sisters of Mercy in 1854 from Cork, Ireland. While she is best known for caring for victims of a 1868 smallpox epidemic in San Francisco, among her many accomplishments was the opening in 1866 of an orphanage in Grass Valley, Calif. The children were the offspring of prospectors who had gone to California during the Gold Rush.¹⁵

THE GALVESTON ORPHANS

One of the most heartbreaking stories comes from Galveston, Texas. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word opened Charity Hospital in 1866 to care for the sick and for orphans. By 1900, the sisters housed 93 orphans in an orphanage on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. On September 8 and 9, a fierce storm battered Galveston. As the water flooded into the orphanage, the sisters moved the children to the second floor. Each sister took clothesline and tied 10 orphans to her body. They sang "Queen of the Waves" to calm the children's fears. In the early evening, a tidal wave lifted the dormitory off its foundation, and the roof came crashing down. Of

the orphans, only three survived. Many bodies of the sisters were found with children still tied to them. In 1994, the state of Texas placed a plaque at the site, commemorating the sisters' heroism.¹⁶

REFORM

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a growing call for social reform. Muckraking journalists brought the public's focus to everything from the injustice of child labor to the deplorable state of public health to the despicable practices of the meatpacking industry. In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt brought together experts from across the nation to explore the issue of needy children. Out of that meeting came a new focus on helping families keep their children in their homes. In 1910, New Jersey became the first state to provide monthly payments to widows and deserted wives, a decisive first step toward keeping families together.¹⁷

As the conventional wisdom about how to best care for orphans shifted, some orphanages sought to create a more home-like atmosphere, while others refocused their efforts on moving children to foster care. During the Great Depression and the subsequent Dust Bowl, there was a sharp rise in the number of children in orphanages, but in 1935, the government began providing Aid to Dependent Children, a significant step toward keeping children with their families. By the 1960s, orphanages were largely gone.



However, a new need surfaced with the baby boom that followed World War II: special health care for children. Catholic hospitals began to dedicate pediatric wings to care for children, and in St. Louis, the archdiocese made a case for the first Catholic children's specialty hospital in the country.

A study commissioned by the archdiocese found that polio, along with the increasing number of "birth defects, diseases and injuries required specific pediatric care" and there were insufficient beds in the region to meet the needs.¹⁸ In addition, a pediatric hospital aligned with a medical school would advance pediatric research. Further, the hospital would aid children of all races and creeds.

The \$5 million fundraising effort to build Cardinal Glennon Memorial Hospital for Children began in 1950. Every dime contributed by a child earned the right to purchase a brick for the building.¹⁹ So strong was the enthusiasm for the new hospital that every member of the AFL Building and Construction Trades Council contributed a day's pay to the fund. The hospital was dedicated April 15, 1956, with huge fanfare. The building included surgery, radiology, labs, pharmacy, a heart clinic, outpatient services, occupational therapy and physical therapy and a social work department. The building was air-conditioned and featured chilled drinking-water fountains, both novelties for the time. The congregation now known as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary agreed to operate the hospital.

Sr. Noreen McGowan, a registered nurse, was there the day the children were transferred from the nearby St. Mary's Hospital children's ward to the new hospital. And she was still there when SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center observed its 50th anniversary. "I thought I had died and gone to heaven when I came here," remembered Sr. Noreen, who remained at the hospital as a volunteer until age 97, when she retired. Today, the hospital meets still another need of the times: 65 percent of the children who receive care there are on Medicaid.

As we enter the second decade of the new millennium, children's care continues to change. Certainly, obesity is emerging as a significant threat to children's health. And although there are far fewer Catholic sisters to meet the needs, the hope is that their legacy of caring for society's most vulnerable will shape the actions of Catholic health care far into the future.

Mother Marianne dressed the lepers in stylish clothing, restoring to them a sense of worth.

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NOTES

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