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THE MARIANITES AND THE FRENCH HOSPITAL

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**The Marianites and
French Hospital**

by

Sister Mary Stephen Manning, M.S.C.

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The Marianites And French Hospital

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, New York was a city teeming with adventure and excitement. It was a young giant, suddenly bewildered by the discovery that it had other ways to grow, rather than through sheer size.

It was a decade that saw the founding of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the building of the steamship, Clermont, which made a triumphant run to Albany in the unprecedented time of thirty-two hours. It was also the tragic end of the duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, just across the Hudson River. This closed the practice of dueling in many states of the young country.

New nationalities and new tongues had started coming into the city from the far corners of the earth. These included refugees from poverty, politics and religious oppression. There were also those drawn by the limitless opportunities of the new country.

The French speaking people played a large part in the settlement of the island of Manhattan. Yet few New Yorkers realized that there was a well-known French Quarter of the city located between Sixth and Ninth Avenues extending some twenty blocks above Fourteenth Street. The

twenty thousand people who populated this section, around the turn of the century, were mostly artisans. They were dressmakers, hairdressers, laundresses, pastry cooks, chefs, and, as the automobile became popular, they were chauffeurs.

To take care of these people in time of need, the French Benevolent Society was organized in 1809. Any French sailors, who arrived in New York, and were ill, were taken care of by the Society.

The first French Hospital was founded in 1881. This was quite a number of years after the founding of the Society. The hospital was located in a small building at 131 West 14TH Street. It contained twenty-two beds "for the care of the French poor". There were four wards and two private rooms.

In 1885 the Marianites were offered a mission which was to prove of great importance to the Congregation. It was that of the French Hospital in New York City. On June 27th, 1885, Mother Mary of the Seven Dolors, Mother Foundress, received a letter from Mr. Charles Renaud, President of the French Benevolent Society, asking for Sisters to staff its hospital. It had been opened four years previously and had been operated by a secular staff.

He wrote, "Until the present, we have employed a secular staff at our hospital. But some members of our Board of Trustees believe it would be to the advantage of the hospital to have Religious, who devote themselves to works of charity, operate it. I foresee no difficulty in this change of personnel, but we desire to keep our hospital non-sectarian. Entrance requirements will be that the person to be admitted, be French or of French descent.

Before proposing this change to the Board, I consulted Archbishop Corrigan of New York, as to the arrangements to be made. He advised me to address myself to the Marianites already established in the diocese. Therefore, Rev. Mother, I come on the recommendation of the Mother Superior of St. Vincent de Paul Orphanage in New York. I would like to ask you on what conditions we may assure ourselves the services of three or four Sisters to take care of our patients. One of them will replace our present superintendent."

Unknown to the Sisters, many members of the French Benevolent Society were greatly opposed to having Religious in the hospital. The Board was composed of several different religious denominations, including some who were Masons.

When they heard of Mr. Renaud's actions, great opposition was raised. The date set for the arrival of the Sisters was approaching. Until then, no vote of agreement was reached. Unaware of all this, the Sisters arrived from France, only to learn that their services had not been accepted. However, when the members of the Hospital Board learned that they were already in New York, they agreed to accept them. The matter was settled on December 8th, 1885. The news caused great satisfaction to the French Colony in New York.

Mr. Charles Renaud, President, and Mr. Charles Joly, Vice President, came to meet them at St. Vincent de Paul Orphanage, where they were receiving hospitality. It was agreed that they would visit the establishment and take up their duties on December 26th, 1885.

Archbishop Corrigan received them enthusiastically. "God be blessed!" he said. It is most necessary to have Sisters there. You will do much good". The Archbishop designated the Fathers of Mercy for the spiritual direction of the community, and then the Jesuits, in whose parish the hospital was located.

Three Sisters took up residence in the French Hospital. They were St. Mary of St. Cecilia, Superior and Supervisor, Sr. Mary of Bethlehem, and

Sr. Mary Palagia, Infirmarians. They retained two of the former nurses. A layman remained as manager for both the Society and the hospital.

The Sisters were given two rooms on the sixth floor for their own quarters. They took their meals in the same dining room as the manager, the doctor and the pharmacist, but at different hours. The lack of space was inconvenient and embarrassing, but they had hopes for the future.

Worse than the physical appearance, was the atmosphere of hosility which the Sisters encountered in their work. If they were to help their unfortunate countrymen, physically and spiritually, they would have to act with utmost discretion and prudence in order to offend no one, while strictly adhering to duty.

Nevertheless, they were kindly welcomed by the Board of Administrators, members of the Benevolent Society, and especially by the doctors. They knew that they could expect cooperative and generous help in the devoted care that they themselves gave to the sick. This evidence of esteem and confidence was a great encouragement to the Sisters, especially at the beginning of their difficult task.

One of the first fruits of their quiet apostolate was the conversion of a Protestant patient who was baptized and made her First Communion in the

Hospital. She was confirmed by Archbishop Corrigan, and died two weeks later in sentiments of the deepest peace and resignation. Consolations such as these, made all things easy, and sweetened the frequent bitterness of their toil.

In 1887, our Venerated Mother Foundress, who had been elected First Assistant in 1886, made a special trip to America, to visit her Sisters in the French Hospital. We can understand the joy with which they listened to her maternal advice and words of encouragement. The poverty and deprivation of the Sisters caused her great pain. She consoled them with the blessing of God and the future success of their work.

Since most of the patients did not pay for their treatment, a yearly deficit accumulated. The financial situation became desperate. This led to the resignation of Mr. Renaud, as well as all the doctors. The Administrative Council decided to abandon the work and to donate a sum of money for the care of poor French families in one of the city hospitals.

When things were humanly at their worst, Divine Providence came to the rescue. Mr. James Thoron, a Catholic layman, had the courage to accept the presidency of the almost abrupt corporation. His ability and perseverance carried his plans to success, despite the overwhelming odds

against his administration.

Sr. Mary of St. Cecilia, Superintendent, counseled Mr. Thoron to acquire a larger building. This would provide private rooms for paying patients, thus providing a source of revenue. A fund raising drive raised \$18,000.

In 1888, the year of the Great Blizzard, the hospital moved into two converted brownstone houses at 320 and 322 West 34th Street. Its bed capacity was increased to 90.

With the opening of the enlarged hospital, the Board of Governors, petitioned the French Government to allow them to charter as administrators, the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, an order founded in France in 1841.

The worst poverty was still the lack of an oratory where the Blessed Sacrament might be reserved. A friend of a patient took up a collection one night at the Hotel Delmonico, where he was dining. The sum realized was \$69.00. It was sufficient to convert a room into an oratory. On January 17th, 1889, the first Mass was celebrated, and Mr. Thoron claimed the honor of being the first server.

The hospital had continued to prosper. The number of Sisters had increased, and patients crowded every available space. It was now evident that even larger quarters had to be secured. A building was constructed from 450 to 458 on West 34th Street to the cost of \$400,000. This seven story building could care for 150 patients. The opening took place on November 12, 1904, presided over by the French Ambassador to the United States.

A local newspaper wrote: "The new French Hospital is located on the highest part of this section of the city. Built on solid rock, it rises seven stories above the ground. It faces the Hudson River and receives an abundance of light and fresh air. Nothing has been spared to make this institution perfect as to medical, surgical and sanitary installation. It affords the greatest possible comfort to those who will come to regain their health within its walls."

On December 26, 1911, the Board of Trustees and the Medical Board of the French Hospital celebrated twenty-five years of service given by Sr. Mary of Bethlehem and Sr. Mary of St. Pelagia, who had witnessed the steady growth of the now important establishment. Mr. Jouvaud, President of the Society, publicly thanked the Sisters, and

presented to each, in the name of the administration and doctors, a silver watch and gold medal. Dr. Henna, head of the Medical Board, briefly recalled the humble beginnings of the French Hospital and the invaluable service rendered by the Marianites of Holy Cross.

The French Hospital continued to be visited by famous French Ambassadors and Consuls. Fifteen baptisms in one year, numerous souls brought back to the sacraments, and many marriages blessed, were among the spiritual rewards that the labors of the Sisters accomplished.

The Spanish Flu struck New York in 1918. Its first victims were the sailors from the French cruisers. Beds were soon filled and cots were placed in corridors. Physical and spiritual wounds were healed. Many patients returned to the Sacraments, through the help of the Chaplain.

This episode proved again that the hospital was too small. The completion of the mammoth Pennsylvania Terminal in 1910, the rapid growth of the fur and garment district, the piers and large hotels, brought into New York City thousands of visitors. All these factors placed new demands on French Hospital.

St. Vincent's Hospital was located on West 11th Street,
St. Clare's Hospital on West 51st Street and Bellevue Hospital on the

lower East Side of the city. French Hospital was located in the middle, with many people to serve. In the mid-twenties, plans were made for a new hospital with twelve floors. This is the hospital that remained until it finally closed in 1977.

Mayor Jimmy Walker officially laid the cornerstone for the new structure at 330 West 30th Street on April 18, 1928. It was blessed by Msgr. Lavelle, designated by his Eminence Cardinal Hayes. It contained 239 beds, in addition to a Maternity Pavillion of 68 beds. Its Dispensary and Clinics admitted over 20,000 patients annually.

Located in a densely populated and highly industrialized neighborhood, great demands were placed upon the Emergency Service. The greatest demand put on the entire staff occurred in June 1929 when a disastrous subway explosion literally filled many beds of the newly-built hospital. Other disasters to which French Hospital responded were the burning of the Normandie and the crash of a passenger airliner into the Empire State building.

The new hospital had a magnificent lobby with marble walls. On these walls were names of numerous benefactors and members of the French Government. The floors from the lobby to the fourth floor contained

offices, Board Room, Emergency Room, Pharmacy, Record Room, clinics, laboratory and x-ray. The entire fourth floor contained all the dining areas for Sisters, doctors, nurses and other employees.

The fifth floor was expressly dedicated to the Sisters for sleeping quarters, Chapel, sacristy and Community room. The floors from the six to eleven were for patients. The operating room was on the twelfth floor, with a large enclosed auditorium on the roof. The basement contained the kitchen and store room. The new hospital was indeed a showplace.

It was to this mission in the early 1930's that several Marianites came to minister. Young women, mostly Irish, had entered the order in France. After their Novitiate and First Vows, they came to America to New York to the French Hospital. These Sisters spoke French which was very useful in their work.

They were given jobs in the hospital to get accustomed to working in a medical institution. After finishing necessary studies, they went into Nurse's training. There had been a Nursing School at the hospital from 1907 to 1935. In fact, seven Marianites were in the first graduating class of French Hospital. Since the school was closed, the Sisters did their training at St. Catherine's Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, with

Dominican Sisters.

Sisters who did not go into nursing occupied various jobs in the hospital as receptionists, sacristan, receiving department and offices. All rendered invaluable service.

One particular humorous incident occurred while an Irish sister was working in the Admitting Office. When she asked an incoming patient what his occupation was, he said, "I'm a car washer". She understood the man to say that he was a "cow washer". With a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye, she responded, "I did not realize that there were cows in New York and that they washed them".

The Sisters now numbered eighteen, between 1940 to 1963. Their stipend which was \$25 a month was increased to \$50. In 1960 it was raised to \$90 and in 1961 to \$100. Fringe benefits included health insurance, death and burial expenses, travel for conferences connected with their profession, and all licensing fees. Room and board were included with their Administration of the hospital.

Living quarters for a resident chaplain who ministered to the spiritual needs of the Sisters and patients were provided. There was always a Holy Cross Father as the Chaplain. Daily Mass was celebrated at 6:00 AM.

The Sisters made up a very happy community. They were especially known for their hospitality. French was always a "stopping off place" for traveling priests and Sisters. They could always be counted on to be taken in for an overnight.

Several famous people either visited or were patients at the hospital. Babe Ruth, the famous Yankee baseball player, spent time there as a patient, when his cancer was discovered. Salvadore Dahli, the famous painter, was admitted one night for an emergency appendectomy.

Father Patrick Peyton, C.S.C. the family Rosary priest, made French Hospital his "home away from home". He was a friend of many Hollywood stars. Loretta Young, Margaret O'Brien, and Ann Blythe visited the Sisters at the hospital.

Other visitors were Margaret Truman, daughter of former President Harry Truman and Mr. James Carroll, Lord Mayor of Dublin. He came from Ireland on the first flight of the newly established Irish Air Lines.

"The Little Singers of Paris" arrived in New York to give two concerts. Six of them became ill with the "Asian Flu". They were admitted to French. By the next day, fourteen sick singers were in the hospital. It was possible to have all of them on the same floor. Though

some were quite ill at the time of admission with very high temperatures, they recovered rapidly after a four day stay.

In 1944 the New York State Department was undergoing an acute shortage of nurses. Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, New York, where theory was taught, made an agreement with French Hospital to assume the direction of the clinical experiences of student nurses. The Sisters in charge of each nursing floor were responsible for the instruction of trainees on the floor. Sr. Mary of the Sacred Heart was appointed assistant director of the school of nursing. A class of thirty-eight started the program. The blue and white uniform of the students again became a welcome sight in the corridors.

Throughout the 1940's, Sisters left French Hospital to become involved in other works. Three Marianites went to San Antonio, Texas to work as war nurses. They put order into the existing facilities. Their work received the highest praise. It was said that the Sisters had transformed the medical department into one of the best in the Army. Eventually the Air Force took over and closed the hospital. The Sisters were thanked for their patriotism, sacrifice and labor.

Five Sisters went to Lac Melgantic, Canada to administrate St.

Joseph's Hospital. Two Sisters went to Opelousas, Louisiana to work in Opelousas General Hospital where a Marianite, Sr. Madeline Sophie, was Administrator. They went in the middle 1950's. Other Sisters went to the foreign missions in Pakistan.

A noteworthy social event that benefited French Hospital was the "April in Paris Ball" that was held annually at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York. It was attended by noteworthy benevolent citizens. At one of the affairs \$75,000 was realized. The Superior of French received \$38,000 for the hospital. The rest was divided among French-American organizations.

The Marianites continued their services until the early 1960's. On October 2, 1962 the following letter was sent by Sr. Mary Cecelia, the last Superior and Superintendent, to the Mother General, Mother Odile, in France.

August 2, 1962

My honored and dear Mother,

It would take a long time to give you a detailed report of the conditions at French Hospital. At present, our accreditation is pending. We may lose our Interne and Resident teaching program. This is entirely in the hands of the Medical Department. Nursing Service is far below par. The Doctors are not satisfied with how things are being done, but no one will move to do anything about it. Conditions on the floors are very

not here to see how things are done---all of them are too removed from the Hospital. Recently they appointed a lay assistant to Miss Foran, a non Catholic, and did not consider a Sister who has a degree.

Apart from the above problems, we are getting more new men assigned to the staff. Some of them do not understand our ethics or our position here. We have not started a "Contraceptive Clinic" at French Hospital. We have a Fertility Clinic, which Catholic hospitals are also including in their program. However, the man (Dr. Kuperman) who is in charge of the clinic published in the "Medical Tribune" in February that he prescribes the new medications as contraceptives. Another young Doctor has included the name of the hospital in a published article, and he is associated with the Sanger Clinic, doing research.

Within the hospital, with no Sister in the Operating Room, there is complete lack of supervision. We know of an incident where a doctor would have done a sterilization, had he not had a Catholic nurse scrubbed on the case. Our O.B. department does not have adequate supervision.

Apart from all of this, when we previously tried (in Sister Mary Magdalen's time), to get a written policy where we could control these operations, the Board refused to give it. We have no authority to post Catholic policies, or say that such operations are not to be done.

When I talked to a Catholic doctor on the Staff about our problem, he said, "This is not a Catholic Hospital and you do not belong here." I hope the above covers your question, and will give you a general idea of how things stand here.

In November 1962 a meeting was held with the Board of Administration. After discussion with Cardinal Spellman of New York and our Mother General it was decided that the Marianite contract with French Hospital be terminated. One year's notice was given. The Sisters gradually started to leave. In November 1963, all the Sisters left French Hospital after

started to leave. In November 1963, all the Sisters left French Hospital after 78 years.

The hospital continued to function for several years. It associated itself with Polyclinic Hospital on West 50th Street. In May of 1977 the doors of the building on West 30th Street were closed. After renovation, several years later, it became a dwelling for senior citizens.

I could never give a paper on French Hospital without including my personal experiences there. I worked as a nurse on a Medical Unit for two years. I had aspirations to enter the convent and my dreams were realized as I worked with the Marianites. They were kind, caring, dedicated Religious who gave of themselves to the care of the sick.

They were loved and respected by all with whom they came in contact in their daily work. I made the decision to enter with them. After a Novitate at Our Lady of Princeton, I returned to French and spent eleven happy years there as a nurse working on all the units, as Supervisor.

Since the Sisters were in the hospital twenty-four hours a day, we did our share of night duty, from 7 P.M. to 7 A.M. We did this tour for eight weeks at a time, with no night off. Night duty was busy and exciting. Being in an area of the city where nights were very active, we received many

accident cases. Our Emergency Room was busy all night. Some of our patients were longshoremen from the docks, who were brought in with numerous injuries. Often our operating room was in service several hours during the night. Our "on call" nurses and doctors spent many long hours saving lives.

A nice custom that the Marianites had, took place every January around the feast of Father Moreau. The Holy Cross Sisters from Indiana taught at St. Paul's School on West 59th Street in the city. One year we entertained them at French with a dinner and the other year they entertained us at St. Paul's. It was a wonderful way of sharing and being together with each other.

The 78 years of the Marianites at French Hospital will always hold fond memories for the Sisters who labored there. The healings of body and soul of the patients who passed through this institution could never be measured. Leaving French brought sadness, but the works of the past will always be remembered.

My memories at French Hospital are aptly told by an employee who was present when the hospital was closed in 1977. I will close by quoting from an article that was written about the final days of this great institution.

"On Friday night, May 13th, 1977 our French Hospital will stand deserted, a victim of these chaotic times and of poor judgment. Maybe some guards will watch over you, but gone are the people who loved you and called you our second home. No one will take care of the sick and injured here anymore, and what will happen to us who loved you, to those who need our care?

We were proud of you and we gave you fully of ourselves. We will be gone to our separate destinies and you will stand deserted. Some of us remember the Marianite Sisters who would take in the poor of the neighborhood each holiday and give them good meals and clothing.

We had a tradition of excellence. Doctors came from everywhere to have the privilege of watching Dr. Henry Falk operate. We remember Dr. Keyes who knew everyone and greeted the kitchen workers in the same courtly manner as he did the doctors and nurses.

And who could forget Dr. Henry Huber whose vitality could nearly wake the dead and who set an example of dedication for all. Dr. Leo Keller's Radiology Department and Dr. Cyril Solomon's Laboratory were turned into centers of learning and healing.

Trouble came and we were forced into a marriage with Polyclinic Hospital on West 50th Street. The groom made us feel like a poor bride. We felt we had class and soul, but the groom from 50th Street did not appreciate us. And so the bad marriage produced a sick child on West 30th Street. That was the beginning of the end, and now you will stand deserted.

Blum auditorium will no longer echo with the sounds of learning, or parties and of meetings. Your operating rooms will stand idle. No one will be saved here now. Only the echo of our voices will be heard from the roof to the basement.

Goodbye French Hospital. We loved you and we will never forget you".

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