The Pandemic of 1918 | CHI St. Joseph

FORMATION INNOVATION PODCAST: Courageous Paths of Hope & Healing Series

In the fall of 1918, the United States, along with the rest of the world suffered through the worst pandemic of modern history, the Spanish flu! It appeared in Spain in 1916 and gradually, due to World War I, spread through Europe; by 1918 it was a world wide plague. A half million Americans died. Laws were passed even in small cities that forbade all manner of public assemblies, and schools were closed until the cold of December moderated the contagion. In Toledo, Ohio thirty thousand people became ill; by the time the disease had run its course seven months later, eleven hundred had died.

The Sisters of St. Francis, Sylvania, Ohio numbering fifty-eight members at the time were active when the schools closed and in spite of the dangers, visited homes and hospitals. These Sisters were not trained in healthcare, but were educators. No record of their acts of charity exist except for the work that five did at Gypsum, Ohio.

Gypsum had a company town near Port Clinton, Ohio where workmen at the plant and the miners as well as their families were severely stricken. The company superintendent, C.L. Hann, appealed to the pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Port Clinton for help in caring for the sick. Fr. Raphael Kinnane turned to Bishop Schrembs who asked Mother Adelaide to deal with the problem. On October 28, 1918, the very morning after the bishop's call, Mother Adelaide and five Sisters appeared in Gypsum. The Sisters immediately began work and during the course of the epidemic cared for ninety-eight cases with no fatalities.

As tragic as the events of 1918, the ministry rendered in Gypsum was a prelude to establishing a tradition of hospital care in the new community of the Sisters of St. Francis, Sylvania, Ohio. Beginning in 1920, requests came to the Sylvania mailbox for the community to enter the hospital field. The Sisters entered the healthcare ministry October 18, 1921. Before they knew it, others were inviting the Sisters to provide healthcare in their states.

The Sisters were invited in late 1933 to look over the Bryan Hospital. It took just over a year to assemble a staff to send, but on March 1, 1935, the three story red brick building in Bryan was leased to the Sisters of St. Francis for a year, and then purchased by the Sisters in 1936. Today, Sister Lois Anne Palkert and Sister Penny Dunn are Mission Leaders for the CHI St. Joseph Healthcare System.