# Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, Ohio and the 1918 Flu Pandemic

FORMATION INNOVATION PODCAST: Courageous Paths of Hope & Healing Series

In 1916, Mother Adelaide Sandusky and 22 pioneer sisters from the Franciscan Sisters in Rochester, Minnesota, arrived in Ohio at the request of Toledo Bishop Joseph Schrembs to staff Catholic schools for the children of Polish immigrants in northwest Ohio. In the early years, the sister prayed and worked with zeal despite living in cramped quarters with meager heat, food and resources; some teaching multiple grades without adequate preparation and training, juggling varied responsibilities and internal house chores, but living in community with joy and generosity.

The sisters and their students began the school year of 1918 with the same blend of happy anticipation and wistful memories of summer that mark all such beginnings. The end of the school year would see them look back with feelings of relief and gratitude for still being alive. In the fall of 1918, the United States, along with the rest of the world, suffered through the worst pandemic of modern history. The 1918 flu pandemic often referred to as the Spanish flu because Spain was the first country that allowed reports of the epidemic to be publicized, indirectly catapulted the sisters into hospital ministry.

Researchers today still disagree on where the flu first started, but undeniably World War I contributed to its spread. An estimated 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, thirty thousand people became ill; by the time the disease had run its course seven months later, eleven hundred had died.

The sister were active when the schools closed and in spite of the dangers visited homes and hospitals. No records of their acts of charity exist except for the work that five did in Gypsum, Ohio. U.S. Gypsum had a company town near Port Clinton, Ohio where workers at the plant and the miners as well as their families were severely stricken. The company superintendent appealed to the pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Port Clinton for help in caring for the sick. The pastor 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. Mother departed the next day leaving the group at two lakeside cottages donated for use as convent and clinic. Sisters Emmanuel, Eugenia, Elizabeth and two others not named got to work, using common sense and trust in God to care for those ill. All five were remembered with gratitude in the local newspaper, *The Ottawa County Republican*.

> The Sisters began work on October 28 and during the course of the epidemic cared for 98 cases with no fatalities. There were three deaths in the vicinity during this time; local residents who were not under the care of these sisters…This was a piece of philanthropic work that merits more than passing notice. It was a grand thing to do and no doubt resulted in saving many lives.

As tragic as the events of 1918 and early 1919 were, the service rendered at Gypsum was a prelude to establishing a tradition of hospital care in the new community. Beginning in 1920, requests came to the Sylvania mailbox for the community to enter the hospital field. The sisters were identified with their mother congregations, the Sisters of St. Francis of Rochester, Minnesota, whose St. Mary's Hospital was the nucleus of the renowned Mayo Clinic. The early requests were turned down based not on selfishness but on a lack of personnel.

Once sisters were trained, credentialed and available, and as vocations swelled the membership, healthcare joined education as the community's primary ministry. The Sylvania Franciscans formally entered the healthcare ministry in 1921 with a one-year lease to staff General Hospital in Ashland Kentucky. The first hospital owned by the congregation was Providence Hospital in Sandusky, Ohio. When the hospital was taken over from the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine in 1923, it was a thirty-bed institution and had an enrollment of eleven in the nurses' training school. In only three years, a new building doubled the patient capacity.

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Over the years of hospital expansion—especially 1930 to 1960—the congregation often assumed financial risk in agreeing to open and staff various institutions. Mother Adelaide saw the importance of these choices as ways to offer service to God's poor, the most neglected and most in need—often in rural, non-Catholic areas without adequate healthcare. While never foolhardy or reckless, she weighed local needs against the community's ability to provide support and adequate staffing. She stepped out in faith when the balance was justifiable to all parties and the Gospel message could be extended further.

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