

Journal of the Plague Year – A message to Sewanee students

A window in All Saints' Chapel commemorates and honors the sacrifice of Sister Constance and the "Martyrs of Memphis." One of five Episcopal sisters who had come to Memphis in 1873 to start a school and orphanage, Sister Constance and three of her colleagues all succumbed while treating those infected during the yellow fever outbreak in 1878. Their ages ranged from 26 to 33.



I recently finished reading Molly Caldwell Crosby's excellent study of yellow fever, *The American Plague*, published in 2006. So much of that story seemed so very appropriate to us in our own time as we battle our own COVID-19 pandemic.

Selfless service and heroic sacrifice characterized the work of these "martyrs of Memphis." Eventually, years later, yellow fever would be subdued. Meanwhile, these sisters would put their own lives on the line to try to keep the plague at bay. Their successors, in 1888, would start a school for girls on this very mountain. To this day, St. Mary's Sewanee is the home of a group of sisters who carry on in the spirit of their martyred predecessors.

Neither yellow fever nor COVID-19 has been as persistent a plague affecting our country as the disease that has once again broken out in communities everywhere recently. Slavery has been called America's Original Sin. Its legacy continues to taint us. Try as we may, the best we have been able to do is, as was the case with yellow fever, to subdue it. It has not yet been, and may never be, eradicated. It is to be condemned and, always, to be opposed.

And yet—as we now cope with two plagues, each vexing us, we might pause and reflect on this small but powerful piece of our own history and move beyond condemnation. Sister Constance was not content to exhort others to do something. She put herself on the line. She led by example. It is one thing to make demands. It is quite another thing to seek to make a positive difference, to build and to heal, and not to threaten or to destroy. That is the obligation of every educated human being, and perhaps especially of every member of the Sewanee community. St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to things of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." That is the choice: to conform or to transform by the renewal of our minds, and then to act in our own communities to meet real, pressing needs, to make an investment of self.

Make no mistake: Your University recognizes the pain and grief recent events have caused for many members of the Sewanee family. We reaffirm our commitment as an institution, as our baptismal liturgy states, to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." Our University continues—through the Roberson Project, for one example, and through the decision to meet the full need of every admitted student, for another—to make just such an investment of its institutional self. As you contemplate your own response to the American plague, think not only about what you believe others should do; think about what you yourself can do.

“We say sometimes in cynical wrath that all truth and justice have departed out of this world,” said a September 25, 1878, editorial in the *New York Tribune*. “But those poor Sisters lying dead in Memphis are an all-sufficient refutation of our pessimistic generalities. This generous giving ought to silence, for a time at least, the snarls of the misanthropists. It is strange that so much dying should prove to us that the world is worth living in.” Each year, on September 9, the Episcopal Church commemorates the Martyrs of Memphis with a Collect that prays in part, “Inspire in us a like love and commitment to those in need.”

May these difficult times also inspire us.

EQB,

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