

## Angels Amid a Sea of Blood: The Experience of Catholic Sister Nurses in the American Civil War

Megan Kessler

---

“Unshrinking where pestilence scatters his breath  
Like an angel she moves mid the vapor of death  
Where rings the loud musket and flashes the sword  
Unfearing she walks, for she follows the Lord”<sup>578</sup>

On a brisk October evening in 1861, a horseman reached Notre Dame University carrying an urgent message for Father Edward Sorin. The message was a call for Catholic Sisters to work as nurses for the Union army in the ongoing Civil War. Within hours, Mother Angela Gillespie and five other Sisters of the Holy Cross of Notre Dame were en route to Cairo, Illinois. There, they met with Ulysses S. Grant, who assigned them to a hospital in Paducah, Kentucky. Mother Angela and her sisters travelled immediately, arriving by the following evening. They set to work scrubbing floors, preparing meals, dressing wounds, assisting in surgeries, and keeping the hospital in running order.<sup>579</sup> Later, Mother Angela would travel extensively, procuring more and more Catholic nuns for the cause.<sup>580</sup> She, and many women like her, devoted years of her life to helping and healing in Civil War hospitals. Collectively, these women are known as the Sister Nurses of the American Civil War.

During the war, over 600 Catholic nuns like, Mother Angela, nursed in battlefield hospitals throughout the Union and the Confederacy. They came from twenty-one religious orders, the most famous being the Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Sisters of the Holy Cross.<sup>581</sup> They worked alongside doctors, attended surgeries and amputations, provided comfort and nourishment to the wounded, and managed hospitals. While mainstream scholarship of their achievements and impact has diminished in the last twenty years, it is evident the work accomplished by these Sister Nurses in the Civil War had a very real influence on the nation. Through primary sources and previous scholarship, three themes arise: the portrayal of Catholicism in a positive nature to the dominantly Protestant country, the conversion of soldiers and other hospital workers into the Catholic faith by Sister Nurses, and the impact on the field of nursing, specifically for women.

For many in the United States, Catholicism was an abstract, and possibly even evil, idea. In 1834, the prominent Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher proclaimed “The Catholic Church holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half the civilized world.”<sup>582</sup> Certainly, there was suspicion towards Catholics. One product of this distrust was the creation of anti-Catholic propaganda. Publications ranged from anti-immigration pamphlets to horrific literature detailing

---

<sup>578</sup> Gerald Griffin, “The Sister of Charity,” lines 49-52, in *The Poetical Works of Gerald Griffin* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1854).

<sup>579</sup> James Schmidt, *Notre Dame and the Civil War: Marching Onward to Victory* (Charleston: History Press, 2010), 10-11.

<sup>580</sup> James Walsh, *These Splendid Sisters* (New York: J.H. Sears Company, 1927), 169.

<sup>581</sup> Sister Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>582</sup> Reverend Lyman Beecher, as quoted in Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 16.

affairs between priests and their “enslaved” nuns.<sup>583</sup> It is no wonder that soldiers were often in disbelief that the zealous, wholesome Sister Nurses were in fact Catholic. Sometimes, they had to be convinced by other hospital workers because they heard “such terrible things” about Catholics.<sup>584</sup> At a hospital in Cincinnati, a patient confessed to a Sister of Charity: “Down where I come from Sister, they all think Catholics are bad people, we never saw many I guess.”<sup>585</sup>

Once the sisters started working in the hospitals, reactions ranged across the spectrum, from revulsion, to wonder, to appreciation. While Walt Whitman, a Civil War nurse himself, reflected that Catholic Sister Nurses were unacceptable to nurse “these homeborn American young men.”<sup>586</sup> Nurses like Mary A. Livermore enthused that the Sister Nurses she worked with, “by their skill, quietness, gentleness, and tenderness, were invaluable in sick-wards.”<sup>587</sup> This praise is worth a lot, considering Livermore toured the Civil War hospital scene as part of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and certainly knew the qualities of a good nurse. One particular subject of confusion and reserve was the specific garb worn by Catholic nuns. In a memoir, Sister Ann Cecilia McDonald wrote:

It is surprising that our particular dress was a source of amusement to those who had never before seen a Sister of Charity, or a sister of any other order. We were frequently asked why we dressed so differently to the other ladies. Another, quite young and innocent, desired to play with my beads, thought they would make a pretty watch chain.<sup>588</sup>

In another incident, Nurse Livermore described a heated conversation among sick men who were slightly annoyed with seeing the distinct cornettes of their Daughters of Charity caretakers, “[w]hy can’t they take off those white-wing sun-bonnets?” mused one. Another responded, “[s]un-bonnets! They’re a cross between a white sun-bonnet and a broken-down umbrella.”<sup>589</sup> The dissimilarity of dress was striking and unfamiliar to Protestants, and some liken this phenomenon to opinions about hijab-wearing Muslim American women today.<sup>590</sup>

Despite the mixed feelings about their clothing, the Civil war provided an opportunity for broader America to put a face with the term “Catholic.” A prime example of this is the story of William Fletcher of the 5<sup>th</sup> Texas Infantry. Fletcher had been shot in the foot at the Battle of Chickamauga, but he refused to allow amputation. He was nursed back to health by Sister Nurses who battled his gangrene and saved the limb. Later, Fletcher

---

<sup>583</sup> Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 16.

<sup>584</sup> Martha Libster and Betty Ann McNeil, *Enlightened Charity: The Holistic Nursing Care, Education, and Advices Concerning the Sick of Sister Matilda Coskery* (Naperville: Golden Apple Publications, 2009), 288

<sup>585</sup> Ellen Ryan Jolly, *Nuns of the Battlefield* (Providence: The Providence Visitor Press, 1927), 284.

<sup>586</sup> Walt Whitman, as quoted in Michael F. Fitzpatrick, “The Mercy Brigade.” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 36 (1997): 34.

<sup>587</sup> Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War: A Woman's Narrative of Four Years Personal Experience as Nurse in the Union Army, and in Relief Work at Home, in Hospitals, Camps, and at the Front during the War of the Rebellion. With Anecdotes, Pathetic Incidents, and Thrilling Reminiscences Portraying the Lights and Shadows of Hospital Life and the Sanitary Service of the War* (Hartford: Worthington and Co., 1888), 218.

<sup>588</sup> Sister Ann Cecilia McDonald, as quoted in Judith Metz, *The Love of Christ Urges Us: The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in the Civil War* (Cincinnati: Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, 2012), 34.

<sup>589</sup> Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 219.

<sup>590</sup> Partrick Young, “Nursing Nuns of the Civil War,” (Long Islands Wins, 2013)

[http://www.longislandwins.com/columns/detail/nursing\\_nuns\\_of\\_the\\_civil\\_war](http://www.longislandwins.com/columns/detail/nursing_nuns_of_the_civil_war) (accessed March 18, 2014).

would say that though he was raised to believe “there was no place in heaven for a catholic,” he came to understand and respect the Sisters. After the war, he helped plan and build St. Mary’s Infirmary in Austin.<sup>591</sup> As author Karen Kennelly asserts, America entered the Civil War hating the habit, but left believing it the garb of a hero.<sup>592</sup>

Another central theme in the experience of Catholic Sister Nurses is the occurrence of baptisms and conversions among patients. In memoirs, letters, and journals, Sisters wrote extensively on the baptisms and conversions they were able to conduct. They were proud and relieved to be able to help others reach eternal salvation. In her memoir, Sister Ambrosia Schwartz recorded that “Our duties fatiguing, and often disgusting to flesh and blood, but we were amply repaid by conversions, repentances...”<sup>593</sup>

Understandably, soldiers on their deathbeds especially sought baptism to find solace in their impending passings. There is a multitude of tales about soldiers dying minutes or hours after receiving a baptism. Jack, a soldier being cared for at Saint Francis Xavier Church, had been wounded in the Battle of Gettysburg and had since contracted lockjaw. The Sisters knew he had a short while to live, and they spoke with him about death, baptism, and an eternal paradise. After listening, Jack indicated he was ready for baptism. He received the sacrament on a church floor, as he was too weak to be moved anywhere else. Still, Sisters recalled that he remained calm until death, satisfied with a promised heaven.<sup>594</sup>

While many soldiers were baptized on their deathbeds, it was not uncommon for recovering soldiers to convert to the Catholic faith. The self-sacrificial nature of the sisters influenced the men, ensuring them that Catholicism was a just religion. Sister Jane Garvin recalled in a memoir one such instance,

One day [a patient] said to me, “Lady, what is it that I hear the boys call you—Sister?...Well, Sister, I heard that quite a number of you ladies arrived last evening to take care of our boys; now this is very kind. I would like to know something more of a religion which teaches such self-sacrifice. Have you a Bible to give me?”<sup>595</sup>

Sister Garvin gave him a catechism, which he read and shared with the other soldiers. The young man, whom friends called Baldy, received his sacraments and, as far as Sister Garvin knew, lived the remainder of his life as a practicing Catholic.<sup>596</sup>

The third theme that surrounds the Sister Nursing experience is their effect on the field of nursing, especially for women. According to archivist Kathleen Washy, there was a stigma against female nursing, as many thought the nakedness and filth of the job would be too much for a lady.<sup>597</sup> In the years leading up to and during the Civil War, many female characters were proving this stigma wrong. For their unwavering hard work and commitment to nursing, it is not contentious

---

<sup>591</sup> William Fletcher, as quoted in Michael F. Fitzpatrick, “The Mercy Brigade.” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 36 (1997): 34.

<sup>592</sup> Karen Kennelly, *American Catholic Women* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., 1989), 26.

<sup>593</sup> Sister Ambrosia Schwartz, as quoted in Betty Ann McNeil, *Charity Afire: Daughters of Charity Civil War Nurses* (Emmitsburg: Sheridan Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>594</sup> McNeil, *Charity Afire*, 9.

<sup>595</sup> Sister Jane Garvin, as quoted in Metz, *The Love of Christ Urges Us*, 13.

<sup>596</sup> Metz, *The Love of Christ Urges Us*, 34.

<sup>597</sup> Ann Rodgers, “Union’s Top Military Nurses were Nuns.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 30, 2013, <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/06/30/Union-s-top-military-nurses-were-nuns/stories/201306300137>.

to group the Sister Nurses of the Civil War with figures like Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton. Through their skilled and caring work, Sister Nurses changed perspectives on women nurses, impacting the nursing field.

Before the war, many Sister Nurses worked in or managed hospitals, poor houses, insane asylums and orphanages. When the war broke out, they were able to apply their previous medical and administrative knowledge in Civil War hospitals. So rounded were their abilities, Confederate nurse Kate Cumming noted, “Here one of them is the druggist; another acts as the part of steward; and in fact, they could take charge of the whole hospital, with the exception of the medical staff.”<sup>598</sup> Besides cleaning, cooking, and general care, Sisters also assisted surgeons in operations and amputations. Sister Anthony O’Connell recalls: “I became Dr. Blackman’s assistant in the surgical operations. He expressed himself well pleased with the manner in which I performed this duty.”<sup>599</sup> Another Sister Nurse recalls an incident that displays the competency and fortitude of Mother Angela in surgical duty:

Mother Angela was assisting Doctor Franklin with a difficult operation [...] Both surgeon and assistant leaned intently over the patient. Suddenly a red drop fell on Mother Angela’s white coif. Another and still another fell until a small stream was seeping through the ceiling [...] Mother Angela remained motionless, with thoughts concentrated on the delicate surgery. At last the final stich was taken; two heads rose simultaneously. Not until then did the doctor realize that a crimson rivulet from the floor above had fallen steadily on our Mother’s devoted head, bathing coif, face, and shoulders in blood.<sup>600</sup>

The doctors and surgeons who worked with the Sister Nurses came to see their skill and would even request them above male, Protestant nurses.<sup>601</sup> As the war raged on, attitudes about women working in hospitals changed. On September 6, 1862, *Harper’s Weekly* ran a two-page spread titled “The Influence of Women.”<sup>602</sup> This spread included a Daughter of Charity—cornette habit and all—caring for a wounded soldier. The selflessness and proficiency of Sister Nurses set them apart and provided an example of the competency of women as hospital workers.

After the Civil War, Mother Angela and the varied Sister Nurses like her returned to their orders and continued to do the charitable work they had always done. For the Daughters of Charity, the only outward evidence and recognition that they had participated in such a momentous war was a cannon sent by a commander of the division they labored for.<sup>603</sup> For the other orders, the level of recognition was near the same. The Sisters did not receive pay, so their names are usually not even found on war hospital records.<sup>604</sup> Still, years later they recalled the experiences they had, “Faces and voices haunt me yet, calling for home and dear ones whom they were destined never again to behold on Earth,” recorded Sister Agnes Phillips in a memoir. Their legacy was remembered by oral histories, congregational archives and memoirs until the beginning of the twentieth century. At this time, Ellen Ryan Jolly began a ten-year campaign to prove the extraordinary service of

---

<sup>598</sup> Kate Cumming, as quoted in Libster and McNeil, *Enlightened Charity*, 289.

<sup>599</sup> Sister Anthony O’Connell, as quoted in Metz, *The Love of Christ Urges Us*, 27.

<sup>600</sup> Sister Francis De Sales O’Neil, as quoted in Schmidt, *Notre Dame and the Civil War*, 45-46.

<sup>601</sup> Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds*, 71.

<sup>602</sup> Jane Schultz, *Women at the Front* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 55.

<sup>603</sup> James Walsh, *These Splendid Sisters* (New York: J.H. Sears & Company, 1927), 173. (Mother Angela wished that the cannon would be cast into a statue of Our Lady of Peace. It was later melted for the WWI effort.)

<sup>604</sup> *Nuns of the Battlefield*, 284.

Sister Nurses in the Civil War to Congress<sup>605</sup>. The goal was to erect a monument to the Sister Nurses that served in the Civil War. In 1918, the monument was approved, and in 1924 it was completed.<sup>606</sup> Today, at Dupont Circle in Washington D.C., visitors can view a memorial depicting twelve different orders represented by Sister Nurses. Flanked by two angels representing peace, the monument serves as a reminder of the Sister Nurses' experiences and impacts. Through their efforts, the Sister Nurses gave a face to Catholicism, converted and baptized many in the Catholic faith, and opened doors for women in the field of nursing.

---

<sup>605</sup> Metz, *The Love of Christ Urges Us*,52.

<sup>606</sup> Ann Rodgers, "Union's Top Military Nurses were Nuns." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (June 30, 2013), <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/06/30/Union-s-top-military-nurses-were-nuns/stories/201306300137>