

September 9 Constance Nun, and Her Companions, 1878

In August, 1878, yellow fever invaded the city of Memphis, Tennessee, for the third time in ten years. By the month's end, the disease had become epidemic and a quarantine was ordered. While more than 25,000 citizens had fled in terror, nearly 20,000 more remained to face the pestilence. As cases multiplied, death tolls averaged 200 daily. When the worst was over, ninety percent of the people who remained had contracted the fever; more than 5,000 people had died. In that time of panic and flight, many brave men and women, both lay and ordained, remained at their posts of duty or came as volunteers to assist despite the terrible risk. Notable among these heroes were Constance, Superior of the Sisters of St. Mary in Memphis, and her Companions. The Sisters had come to Memphis in 1873, at Bishop Quintard's request, to found a girls' school adjacent to St. Mary's Cathedral. When the 1878 epidemic began, George C. Harris, the Cathedral Dean, and Sister Constance immediately organized relief work among the stricken. Helping were six of Constance's fellow Sisters of St. Mary; Sister Clare from St. Margaret's House, Boston, Massachusetts; the Reverend Charles C. Parsons, Rector of Grace and St. Lazarus Church, Memphis; and the Reverend Louis S. Schuyler, assistant at Holy Innocents, Hoboken, New Jersey. The Cathedral group also included three physicians, two of whom were ordained Episcopal priests, the Sisters' two matrons, and several volunteer nurses from New York. They have ever since been known as "The Martyrs of Memphis," as have those of other Communion who ministered in Christ's name during this time of desolation. The Cathedral buildings were located in the most infected region of Memphis. Here, amid sweltering heat and scenes of indescribable horror, these men and women of God gave relief to the sick, comfort to the dying, and homes to the many orphaned children. Only two of the workers escaped the fever. Among those who died were Constance, Thecla, Ruth, and Frances, and the Reverend Charles Parsons and the Reverend Louis Schuyler. The six martyred Sisters and priests are buried at Elmwood Cemetery. The monument marking the joint grave of Fathers Parsons and Schuyler bears the inscription: "Greater Love Hath No Man." The beautiful High Altar in St. Mary's Cathedral, Memphis, is a memorial to the four Sisters.

Collect We give you thanks and praise, O God of compassion, for the heroic witness of Constance and her companions, who, in a time of plague and pestilence, were steadfast in their care for the sick and dying, and loved not their own lives, even unto death: Inspire in us a like love and commitment to those in need, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Lessons

Job 16:6–9

"If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me?"

Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company.

And he has shriveled me up, which is a witness against me; my leanness has risen up against me,

and it testifies to my face.

He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

Psalm 25:15–21

15 My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me[a] out of my distress.

18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.

19 Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.

20 O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.

John 12:24–28

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."