



World Aids Day, December 1, 2011

Generations of Sisters and Daughters of Charity learned by heart that the central purpose of our vocation was to honor Jesus Christ by providing him “every temporal and spiritual service in their power” in the persons of the poor whom they served, including those “who through shame would conceal their necessities.”

Passed down from Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac to Elizabeth Seton, these words took flesh in the Sisters’ courageous service in time of epidemics like cholera, yellow fever, and influenza. In the late twentieth century, another plague blanketed the world with fear and shame – HIV/AIDS. Once again, Sisters of Charity were ready to respond to the grace of the moment and to honor Christ in the suffering members of his Body.

December 1, World AIDS Day, reminds us of the courage and compassion of those who ministered to persons with AIDS.

New York City was Ground Zero in the early days of AIDS. Many Sisters of Charity of New York met the physical and spiritual needs of AIDS patients, doing what was before them to do, as St. Vincent de Paul counseled. They served in settings like St. Vincent’s Hospital and Medical Center, Bayley Seton Hospital, the New York Foundling, St. Clare’s Hospital, Incarnation Children’s Center, Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center, Lincoln Hospital, Cabrini Medical Center and others. Though some of these institutions have closed, Sisters continue to serve AIDS victims to this day.

St. Vincent’s Hospital and Medical Center in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, was noted for its care of persons with HIV/AIDS. In a [NY Times](#) article, 10/14/11, Robin Finn wrote: “St. Vincent’s, which recorded one of the earliest AIDS cases, in 1981, was the home of the first, and most famous, AIDS wing in the Northeast. Tens of thousands of its patients were among the 100,000 New Yorkers who died from 1981 to 1996, the peak of the AIDS epidemic.” Through their ministries there, the Sisters found themselves in the midst of the AIDS crisis.

The name of **SR. PATRICE MURPHY, SC**, is legendary in AIDS ministry. A nurse for many years, Sr. Patrice directed St. Vincent’s hospice program for the terminally ill. When the world began to take note of AIDS, Sr. Patrice with her staff of nurses, social workers and volunteers pioneered in extending hospice services to persons with AIDS. Patients were cared for in their own homes as well as in the hospital. Sr. Patrice developed an innovative 7-week training program for volunteers, and wrote proposals that successfully won private funding to keep the Supportive Care Program going.

SR. PATRICIA LAWLOR, SC, served as a Chaplain with the Supportive Care Program at St. Vincent’s Medical Center, Manhattan, from 1986 to 2006. She worked closely with Sr. Patrice Murphy. Among her patients were many persons with AIDS. Sr. Pat recalled two of the many people whose stories touched her.

One young man with AIDS who was in the Intensive Care unit asked her to say some prayers with him. Sr. Pat said, "So I prayed the 23rd Psalm because I knew that was a favorite of his. When we finished he said, 'That was like a shot of morphine.'"

Another patient with AIDS was particularly difficult to work with. Sr. Pat felt that she wasn't doing much with or for him. One morning as she went into his room, he took her hand and said, "I'll see you on the other side." "What do you mean?" Sr. Pat said. He replied, "I'm going to go to heaven today and when I go I'll wait for you and I'll see you there." When Sr. Pat asked the nurses if there was some change in his condition, they assured her that he was still the same. "He died that day," marveled Sr. Pat. "He knew he was dying. And all the time I thought I wasn't making any impact."

Sr. Pat commented on the way that patients made her feel welcome in their homes. Though their illness often cut them off from family, they were supported by their significant other and loving friends. "It was a wonderful, wonderful lesson in the care that they had for each other."

SR. CATHERINE SHERRY, SC, served as Administrative Director of Pathology and Laboratories at St. Vincent's, Manhattan, for many years. At the height of AIDS in the 1980's, she recalled, "We'd have 100 inpatients with HIV. Now nobody goes to the hospital. In a relatively short period of time, they've made such terrific strides in HIV treatment."

Dr. Pearl Ma, then chief of microbiology on Sr. Catherine's staff, played a key role in that shift, with a discovery in the early days of the AIDS crisis that led to significant breakthroughs in understanding and subsequently treating the disease.

When AIDS was first diagnosed, even some experienced health professionals were fearful of treating AIDS patients. **SR. MIRIAM KEVIN PHILLIPS, SC**, assistant director of St. Vincent's Nursing School, recalls fielding calls from concerned parents of student nurses. She and **SR. MARY ROBERT NAGLE, SC**, director, told them in no uncertain terms, "A nurse's role is to care for patients, regardless of their disease or condition."

When St. Vincent's expanded Spellman 5 as an AIDS unit in the early 1990's, **SR. ALICE WARD, SC**, served as a nursing assistant there. With the advent of better drug therapies, she saw patients improve rapidly. While a seasoned high school teacher/media specialist, Sr. Alice volunteered with AIDS patients at St. Clare's Hospital, Manhattan, an experience that led her into training as a nursing assistant until she retired in 2009. "It's not my work: my hands are His," she said of her ministry, "If He wants me in this work, He'll help me do it."

SR. SHEILA BROSANAN, SC, worked as a Visiting Nurse at St. Vincent's from 1987 to 1990. She recalled it as "a time when many young men in the village were dying, often with their mothers at their side. One day I went out with a Supervisor from the Department of Health. The patient was a very tall man in his twenties. His mother had come in from the West Coast to take care of him. He was obviously dying and his mother was distraught because her son was not receiving physical therapy. She was sure he would pick up, if only he had the therapy. The Supervisor shook her head and to the mother's relief, approved the therapy. The young man died the next day."

St. Vincent's Medical Center, which had cared for New Yorkers since 1849, closed in April 2010. Many commentators lamented the demise of this landmark Catholic institution that served as "the epicenter of response to the AIDS epidemic in Manhattan in the 1980's." (New York magazine contributing editor

David France) When the full story of the 20th and 21st-century St. Vincent's is written, its competent and compassionate response to persons with HIV/AIDS surely deserves a central chapter.

More stories of Sisters of Charity of New York and Associates in AIDS ministry will appear in the future.

12/1/11