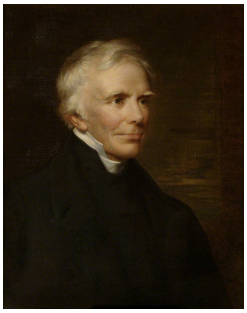
Christ Episcopal Church
Adult Formation 2020

Summer Foundations Course 2020
Guidance from Christians in the midst of Pandemic
July 6, 2020

The poet who launched a reform

On Sunday, July 14, 1833, the Rev. John Keble (*image below*), Anglican priest and Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, preached a sermon that accused Parliament of interfering in the internal life of the Church of Ireland (the Anglican Church in Ireland) by reducing its dioceses from 22 to 12 with no consultation of church leaders. Keble's sermon ignited a storm of controversy for he claimed that the life of the church was not to be determined by the ignorance of public opinion or the whims of Parliament but rather by the gospel of Jesus Christ and the teaching and practices of early Christians – what he called "the apostolic faith." For English Anglicans who viewed the church as one more agency of the Crown and its government, Keble's sermon – widely published the moment it ended – gained him violent criticism from many and robust affirmation from others.



It was his sermon that led to the emergence of the **Oxford Movement** – a reform movement in Anglican faith and life. This movement sought to recover "the apostolic faith" by restoring the teaching and practices of *early* and *medieval* English Christianity. They viewed the 16th c. reformation as but one moment of reform in the long history of Anglican spirituality: not a tragic break. They criticized the Rationalism that had left Christian faith and life bereft of the mystery of God and God's presence in the creation and the sacramental life of Christians. They turned to the medieval Sarum rite of the Mass (the liturgy of the Diocese of Salisbury that had become the English liturgy in the 12th c.) as the inspiration for liturgical renewal. In contrast to the sterile and overly "rational" and wordy worship of most English churches, the Oxford Movement sought to restore the beauty, vesture, gestures, movements, and saints' days of the medieval liturgy: to replace rationalistic discourse with the language of ritual, story, and symbol. That is, they restored the use of practices thought to be dangerously "Roman" – practices that nonetheless gained widespread support among a growing number of English and then American Anglicans. Thus, the movement gave birth to the term **Anglo-Catholic**.

Anglo-Catholic priests were frequently sent to the poorest parishes by their anxious bishops in hopes of suppressing their reforming tendencies. This strategy backfired, as the priests became ardent and public advocates of their poor working class parishioners who were being crushed by the Industrial Revolution.

It was in this milieu that many priests criticized industrial capitalism and argued for a compassionate socialism rooted in their reading the Acts of the Apostles and the practice of monastic socialism in medieval England. Thus, they wedded a catholic liturgy with social justice. As one Anglo-Catholic bishop said: "Our worship of the Body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is inseparable from our care for the bodies of the poor in the cities." His sentiment is little different than that of Mother Teresa: "We receive the broken Body of Christ in the Mass and in the bodies we find abandoned on the streets." Anglo-Catholics led in the restoration of the seven sacraments in Anglican life, the centrality of the Holy Eucharist as the primary Sunday liturgy, and the flourishing of the liturgical arts, liturgical music, and liturgical poetry that was decidedly Christian rather than "royal" in its orientation.

At the same time, the preference for early and medieval Christian practices gave rise to the restoration of **religious orders of women and men** in England, in the United States, and throughout the nations of the British Empire (later the British Commonwealth). Toward the end of the 19th c., Anglican religious communities followed the rules of the Augustinians, Benedictines, Carmelites, Cistercians, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Vincentians. In addition, many other religious communities were founded with their own Rules of Life.

The Sisters of St. Mary

The oldest Anglican religious order founded in the United States is the Sisters of St. Mary, established in New York City in 1865 by Harriet Cannon (*image left*). At the age of three, Harriet's parents died of the yellow fever, leaving her and her sister Catherine orphaned until they were brought to their aunt in Connecticut. It was after the unexpected death of her sister that Harriet began to reconsider her life's path. She soon recognized an inner call to serve among the many poor of New York. She first served as a deaconess but then with four other women asked for permission to form a religious order. Bishop Horatio Potter formally constituted the Sisters of St. Mary, a community that was initially mocked by Protestants and some Episcopalians for their "Roman" ways. Their apostolate, shaped by the *Rule of St. Benedict*, focused on serving abused women, homeless women and men, and orphans. As the community grew in numbers and in donors who saw the value and quality of their labors, they developed girls' schools, hospitals, and orphanages in the East and the Midwest.

In 1872, Mother Harriet responded to an invitation from the Bishop of Tennessee to establish the Sisters of St. Mary in Memphis. In May 1873, she named Sister Constance – then 28 years old – as Superior of the new foundation. With her she sent Sisters Amelia, Thecla and the novice, Sister Hughetta, to establish a school for girls.

In October 1873, a Yellow Fever epidemic struck the city. The Sisters wrote for permission to remain in Memphis, and when that was granted, they took charge of the sick in the Cathedral district and cared for 60 patients, of whom only eight died. In one month, half of the city's 40,000 residents had fled. Of those remaining, 5,000 caught Yellow Fever, and 2,000 died. The Sisters worked 12-14 hours every day, beginning each day with Morning Prayer and Eucharist. They then made house calls on the sick that had been abandoned by their families. As the epidemic subsided, they continued to care for recuperating patients, began teaching in the girls' school, and established a school for poor and homeless children.

Yellow Fever

Yellow fever (also known as Yellow Jack, the Saffron Scourge) is a virus spread by the bite of an infected female mosquito, usually the *Aedes aegypti*, a type of mosquito found in the tropics and subtropics. Symptoms include fever, chills, nausea, muscle pain, and headaches. Liver damage can occur signaled by the yellowing of skin and the eyes (jaundice), thus *yellow* fever. Left untreated, the fever can cause fatal heart, liver, and kidney conditions. In 1878, many believed the onset of yellow fever was due to poor sanitation and air quality; thus, used clothing and bedding were burned; the infected were given carbolic baths; and military cannon were fired in hopes of dispersing what was thought to be an air-borne disease.

The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878

On the feast of St. Mary the Virgin, August 15, the Yellow Fever returned to Eastern Arkansas, Mississippi, and SW Tennessee. Panic spread throughout Memphis and at least two people were trampled to death at the railroad platform as crowds of the well to do rushed to leave the city.

A Picture of Desolation: A Graphic Account of the Appearance of Memphis: By Telegraph to the New York Tribune, September 12, 1878

Dr. Pease says that the horrors of the pestilence are beyond description. He has passed through four yellow-fever epidemics, one at Bombay, two at New Orleans, and one at Key West; but he has seen nothing to compare with the death-stricken aspect of Memphis at the present time.

The wealthy have all departed, leaving the poor to shift as they may for themselves, and to the horrors of the plague are added those of an approaching famine. The provision stores are closed; the only way to obtain supplies is to break into them.

All the drug stores except three are closed, and it is difficult to get medicine, even when medical attendance has been had and prescriptions written. The banks are open only one hour a day. Throngs of black families besiege the commissary depots established by the Howard Association; they have come from the surrounding rural country, risking the pestilence in order to get free provisions. Many are starving.

No vehicles are seen on the streets except the dead-carts and the doctors' buggies, with an occasional hearse conveying the remains of some wealthier victim. At night the streets are lit up with death fires, which burn in front of houses which contain a corpse, though not in front of every house, for many a victim dies alone after suffering unattended, and there is no one to put out the customary signal. Persons taken sick on the streets crawl into unoccupied tenements, and their corpses are afterward discovered by the odor. Many are found dead in public parks or under fences. The bodies of the dead accumulate for want of adequate burial force, and trenches are then dug, in which great rows of coffins are deposited side by side.

Dr. Pease states that the peculiar smell of the pest in the city can be discerned at a distance of three miles. There is a great deficiency of competent nurses. Out of 1,100 nurses, only about 75 are working.

The labor and deaths of the Sisters and their colleagues

The Sisters of St. Mary rejected offers to take up residence in the countryside. They insisted on remaining in the city. Half the population of Memphis fled and rigid quarantines were imposed, but the death rates mounted. The Sisters immediately noticed that the 1878 version of the epidemic was far more virulent than that of 1873. In house after house the Sisters found victims – often abandoned, alone, unconscious, and without medical care. The vast majority of nurses and many physicians had fled the city – as had most clergy.

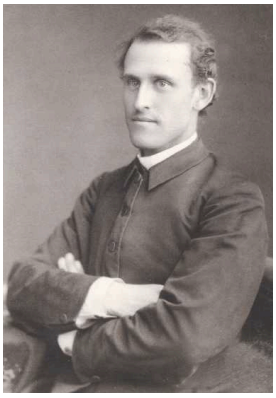
The Sisters transformed their convent into an urgent care center; they took control of the Church House for Orphans and the Canfield Asylum for Orphans. Within four days of assuming responsibility for Canfield, fifty orphans were bathed in carbolic solution and dressed in newspaper wrappers, as there were no clean clothes. Famine was fast approaching: the Sisters and children had nothing to eat but crackers and water. They ran out of bedding as the sheets and pillows of victims had to be burned. The Sisters established soup kitchens and brought food and drink to the homes of the sick. They offered nursing care and brought spiritual solace to the sick and the grieving. They offered the last rites to the dying; they gathered abandoned children; and they made urgent requests through letters for medicine and donations for their work.

Fr. Charles Parsons, the last Episcopal priest in Memphis and their chaplain, came down with the fever. Now the Sisters had no priest. Epidemic deaths exceeded 80 a day. They whole ethos of the city was chaotic: death wagons passed in the streets; looting and murders were commonplace.

Sister Constance wrote in her diary: *Yesterday I found two young girls, who had spent two days in a two-room cottage, with the unburied bodies of their parents, their uncle in the utmost suffering and delirium and no one nearer them but a rough drayman who held the sick man in his bed. It was twenty-four hours before I could get those two fearful corpses buried, and then I had to send for a police officer to the Board of Health before any undertaker would enter the room. One grows perfectly hardened to these things—carts with eight or nine corpses in rough boxes have become an ordinary sight.*


Fr. Parsons


Mother Constance


Fr. Schuyler

On September 5, Sisters Constance and Thecla were stricken with fever. They both refused to use the one mattress in the house for fear of contaminating it, so they lay on the bare floor. The next morning Sister Constance was unconscious and ***Father Charles Parsons*** died, having read for himself the prayers of commendation for the dying. There was no one to give him the last rites.

On September 8, 200 new cases were reported
On September 9, ***Sister Constance*** died at the age of 33
On September 12, ***Sister Thecla*** died and Father Schuyler fell ill with the fever
On September 17, ***Father Louis Schuyler*** died
On September 18, ***Sister Ruth –*** who had been a nun for only a year – cried out "Hosanna" – "Lord, save us!" – and died

At the orphanage, all but four of the children had come down with the fever, and twenty-two died. Overworked there, ***Sister Frances*** became ill on October 1 and died on October 4, the feast of her name saint. Finally, Sister Clare and Sister Hughetta recovered from the fever and with Sister Helen brought order out of the

chaos at Church House. When frost finally came and brought an end to the plague, over 5,000 people were dead, and the city of Memphis itself had gone bankrupt.

Mother Constance and her companions
From left to right
Sr. Frances, Sr. Thecla, Mother Constance, Sr. Ruth
Fr. Louis Schuyler, Fr. Charles Parsons

Why did the Sisters keep diaries and written accounts?
On her study of American Illness Narratives, Samantha Wright notes that the Sisters of St. Mary produced a body of written work *different* than the usual epidemic documents. They did not keep meticulous statistics or facts concerning the epidemic. Rather, they sought to offer a narrative filled with anecdotes and summaries of their work. *They did so knowing that they would most likely die*: they kept diaries, accounts of their work, and descriptions of the fever's effects in the city in order to **demonstrate the value of their vocation as Episcopal sisters** and to **encourage readers** who, in the future, might encounter a devastating disease. One of the Sisters collected the letters, diary entries, reports, and anecdotes of the other Sisters as well as newspaper reports and letters of church leaders. This collection can be found at http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/memphis.html and here http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/csm/memphis1.html. Here is the **beginning** of the Sisters' collection:

It is with deep emotion, and inexpressible reverence and tenderness, that I undertake the task of compiling, from letters, notes, and memoranda which have been placed in my hands, a brief narrative of the acts and sufferings of our beloved in Christ who died of the pestilence at Memphis last year. The motive that leads many to wish for some permanent record of these things cannot, it is thought, be misunderstood by any ingenuous mind. No one could for an instant suppose that it was intended to honor, hereby, the holy departed. Their souls are in the hands of God, and their reward is with the Most High; no one of us could add to the radiance of their crown, nor are we worthy to pronounce the eulogy on such sublime devotion. The glory of their sorrows and their victory is the common property of the Church; *and if it be true, that when one member suffers all the members suffer, and that, when some of us are enabled by God's grace to do noble deeds, the honor may be shared by even the humblest of those heroic souls, then may we all claim it as of right that we should know what has been accomplished.*

The story of Memphis is like a reflection of the story of Calvary. The love of Jesus Christ, in the fullness of its constraining power, is exhibited in those, who, having forsaken all to follow and possess Him, shrank not from the supreme test of their sincerity, but laid down their lives at His bidding. That love should speak to our hearts; as we read of these fruits of divine faith, our own love should kindle, and our faith should be strengthened; the supernatural world is brought very near to us; it seems more real, for a season, than this.

There is another reason why some account of these things should be given. It is said by the skeptical theorists of our day, the philosophers of naturalism and materialism, that self-devotion in a religious life is a past idea; that it pertains to an overstrained and false enthusiasm; that women have no mission now to lift them above the average level around them; *that there is no place among us for those who seek a perfect and entire consecration to our Blessed Lord after the type of the noble spirits of other days. In answer to such sayings, we deem it sufficient to lift, for a few moments, the veil which hides the very things which the rationalist, and the worldly thought it impossible to find at the present day, and to show them, by visible instances, that we have among us a heroism and a devotion worthy of the grandest ages of the Church, known to God, and ready to shine forth as the sun when occasion should be given. "By their fruits ye shall know them," said our Lord; and by this we are assured, that the faith of these our beloved in Christ was the true faith, and that the power which sustained them was indeed supernatural and divine.*

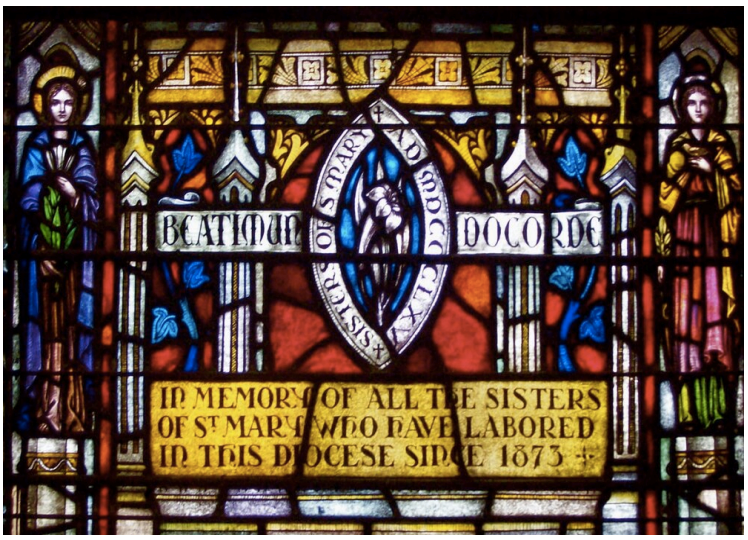
At the **conclusion** of the plague narrative, we find this summary:

Now that it is all over, shall we say that we are left with nothing except these brief and imperfect records, and a tender memory of those who are passed away? Is it not true, that, although dead, they speak to us more distinctly than before, that they are actually more powerful than when among us, and that, in the spirit, they are present with us still? Side by side they are lying far away in the cemetery, at rest after the dread ordeal of those fearful days, and from that lowly bed in the dust they rule our hearts, and come forth to visit us in our dreams and help us in our pilgrimage. Whosoever is wise will ponder these things.

Ever since Christ came among us, there has been taught, in the dark regions of the earth, a full sweet Gospel of Catholic truth, apt to fill every human need, and addressing itself to intellect, conscience, affections, and will. It has its creed, its characteristic spirit, its own ideas, just as human philosophies are known by their

own special principles and postulates. Of this men hear by the hearing of the ear; they compare it, coldly and critically, with rival systems; unless it moves their souls or until God's Spirit has brought it home to them, it remains nothing but a mere theory to be discussed with others.

But the time comes when the Holy Ghost shows us, in some startling manner, what that Catholic Faith is: then dispute and argument cease, and the powerful agency of deathly plague unveils the thoughts of all hearts. *Even so, the Cross of Jesus Christ disclosed what was in the minds of those who beheld it; some saw it with love, some with curiosity, some with indifference, and some with aversion. Here among us in Memphis, Christ's Cross has been 'set up' in the persons of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.*



This has caused a revelation in those who beheld their acts. *We have looked with love and solemn joy on this late scene of crucifixion; to us it has been a preaching of holy truth, attested by such fruits as compel anew our assent and deepen our convictions.* They witnessed to Him in their life and in their death, and we know that their witness is true.

Then may their faith be also ours; as they thought, so may we think; and as they walked, so let us ask the grace also to walk, if it be God's will. And when we muse on all those things, a flood of thoughts overflows the soul; thoughts of love, peace, tenderness, sorrow, wonder; but last and chief of all, thoughts of gratitude to Him who hath showed us all this in His righteousness, the reality of priesthood, the mysterious efficacy of sacraments, the strength of faith, the patience of saints, the completeness of self-sacrifice, the joyfulness of hope, the steadfastness of loyal hearts, the warmth of divine charity, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, the living and life-giving power of the Spirit, the vanity of the world, the triumph over the fear of death, the dawning splendors of the eternal day. All other thoughts are lost at length in that of thanks to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the unspeakable gifts from heaven to men.

"Father Morgan Dix wrote: 'Before the memorable year 1878, many spoke against these faithful and devoted women; but after that year, the tongue of calumny was silent, while men looked on with beating hearts, and eyes dim with tears.'"