



REDEMPTORIST NORTH AMERICAN HISTORICAL BULLETIN

Issue #46 ISSN: 1480-5235 Special Issue

Note to readers: This special issue of the Redemptorist Historical Bulletin responds to the current corona virus pandemic by examining the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. Part I deals with the experience of the Baltimore Province and, immediately following, part II relates the former St. Louis Province's contact with the flu. In the coming weeks, we will be developing further issues to bring the Bulletin's numbers current.

Redemptorists and the Spanish Flu, 1918: The Baltimore Province

By Patrick J. Hayes, Ph.D.



Influenza victims crowd into an emergency hospital at Camp Funston, Fort Riley, Kansas, where historians have traced some of America's initial cases. (National Museum of Health and Medicine photo)

The subject of the Spanish Flu--the dreaded illness that circulated globally between January 1918 and December 1920, killing some 50,000,000 people—has been invoked as a touch point for the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. Parallels are drawn with breathless speed, as if our present history is a carbon copy of a century ago. There are similarities, but also stark differences. The Spanish flu likely spread through troop movements in Europe during the First World War, and it may have been accelerated in the United States when over 100 cases emerged at Camp Funston, Fort Riley, Kansas, in March 1918.¹ There is considerable evidence of COVID-19's emergence from the wet-markets of Wuhan, China, but it has also been suggested that some carriers of the virus to the United States have entered from Europe. Pathways for transmission are often complex, with ground zero often found on shifting sands.

The epidemiology and severity of the 1918 influenza outbreak has consumed the attention of medical historians, not least for the kinds of protest movements that emerged on account of the stay-at-home orders of civil authorities and the consequent re-emergence of the flu's devastation.² In San Francisco, for instance, there arose an "anti-mask league" to end the use of face coverings and other protective equipment, with disastrous results.³ Denver, too, let its guard down in 1918 when the city's pastors began holding outdoor services, only to increase the infection rates late in the year. In St. Louis, while on an election-year tour, Congressman Jacob Meeker stopped at a military base about ten miles from the city

where cases of the flu had rocketed into the hundreds. He did so on the day following the city's mandated closures of public venues and a quarantine directive from the base commander. Within a week, Meeker lay dead in a city hospital after a short bout with the flu.

Military bases were war zones in themselves because so many dough boys were afflicted even before they set off for Europe. More than combat itself, soldiers died of diseases in over half of all war-related fatalities—the vast majority caused by influenza. At Fort Devens, about 40 miles from Boston, one camp physician wrote to a friend:

These men start with what appears to be an attack of la grippe or influenza, and when brought to the hospital they very rapidly develop the most viscous type of pneumonia that has ever been seen. Two hours after admission they have the mahogany spots over the cheek bones, and a few hours later you can begin to see the cyanosis extending from their ears and spreading all over the face, until it is hard to distinguish the coloured men from the white. It is only a matter of a few hours then until death comes, and it is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible. One can stand it to see one, two or twenty men die, but to see these poor devils

¹ This began the so-called "first wave" of flu to hit the United States. See the timeline at: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/three-waves.htm>

² In American history, different kinds of public health measures have met with resistance. In Milwaukee's effort to stamp out a smallpox outbreak in 1894, the public health commissioner ordered a round up of all

the city's immigrants to check the spread. While many would consider this an overreach on the part of civil authorities today, the current President of the United States infamously tweeted that some states ought to be "liberated" from the supposed tyranny of local health directives.

³ See <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-sanfrancisco.html#>.

dropping like flies sort of gets on your nerves.⁴

Red Cross Corps nurses prepare for intake of flu patients, St. Louis, October 1918. Library of Congress photo.



In 2020, the necessity of Zoom meetings and physical distancing, the wearing of masks, and aggressive hand-washing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic are indicators of how people have responded to this special historical moment. These activities mirror the words of health officials past, who seem to be warning future generations of the terrible repercussions attributable to back-sliding or ignoring lessons learned long ago.⁵

⁴ Physician N. Roy Grist to Burt, September 29, 1918, Fort Devens' "Surgical Ward No. 16," cited in Smithsonian Magazine, online at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-we-can-learn-1918-influenza-diaries-180974614/> Fort Devens was among the sites hardest hit by the 1918 influenza epidemic. On September 1, nearly 45,000 soldiers waiting to be deployed to France were located there. According to the New England Historical Society, 10,500 cases of the flu had broken out among them.

Municipalities around the country have tried to resurrect some of the mitigation efforts of the past. In Seattle, where some of the earliest cases of COVID-19 appeared, the use of masks are now *pro forma*, harkening back to the days when any rider on civil

transit would not be allowed on without a face covering. In Philadelphia in April 2020, riders of public transit were forcefully taken off subway cars and busses by police officers because they

were not wearing protective face masks. In New Jersey, local authorities were quick to disperse house parties along the shore for fear of contagion.

There were, however, unfortunate episodes of gatherings that flaunted these measures. For instance, and perhaps most notoriously, some evangelical pastors have placed their congregations at risk by gathering for Sunday services under the assumption that they are favored with God's

⁵ Thus, Dr. John Baldy, president of the State Bureau of Medical Education and Licensure for the State of Pennsylvania, admonished the public about the flu's effects: "Had this disease been placed under quarantine heretofore, the ban which was recently laid upon everything but the right things never would have been heard of. In addition, the mortality during the epidemic would have been 50 percent less. Quarantine is the only safeguard for the future." See "Isolate Influenza Cases In Future," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 4, 1918): 11.

special protection.⁶ For American Church history, too, the relevance of the influenza disaster of 1918 for the shaping of pastoral care, sacramental administration, and public opinion redounds to our own day. While the power of the influenza epidemic in shaping the narrative of American history in 1918 has been dominated by analysis of health records and news articles, some of the religious aspects of the experience of October 1918, when the flu was perhaps most virulent, are crucial to understanding



A rider in Seattle is prohibited from entering a trolley car for lack of a face mask during the influenza epidemic in that city, 1918. Library of Congress photo.

6 As has been noted, decisions affecting Black Pentecostal churches have had dire consequences for that polity's clergymen, many of whom have died from COVID-19. See, for instance, Michelle Boorstein, "Covid-19 has killed multiple bishops and pastors within the nation's largest black Pentecostal denomination," *Washington Post* (April 19, 2020), online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/19/church-of-god-in-christ-pentecostal-coronavirus-kills-bishops/>.

how the country adapted and eventually overcame the flu, without such things as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Center for Disease Control, or unemployment insurance.

This article will focus on how the Spanish flu impacted American Redemptorists and their close collaborators. They have not been strangers to the effects of widespread disease. From the beginning of their mission to the United States in 1832, their travels were circumscribed by a global cholera outbreak that prohibited them from leaving Europe from Le Havre, France. Instead, the pioneers' voyage was set for Trieste, on the Adriatic, and even then they had to wait a week before they could embark.⁷

During the nineteenth century, Redemptorists also weathered two additional outbreaks of cholera in the United States—in 1849 and 1866.⁸ In New Orleans, beginning in 1848 with the death of Father Peter Czackert, of Yellow Fever, successive generations of Redemptorists tended to the city's sick without regard for their own health. They paid dearly. The next to die was a replacement chaplain at New Orleans' Charity Hospital. Father Steinbacher had not been in his post more than four months when he succumbed to typhoid on Passion Sunday, April 6, 1851. The two men are buried in the sanctuary of St. Mary's side by side. Six more of their number perished due to Yellow Fever, including Blessed Francis Seelos, in September and October 1867. Two further names were among those who perished in

[9/church-of-god-in-christ-pentecostal-coronavirus-kills-bishops/](#).

⁷ Michael Curley, *The Provincial Story: A History of the Baltimore Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* (New York: Redemptorist Fathers, 1963), 10.

⁸ See generally Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

the New Orleans 1876 Yellow Fever outbreak: Fathers James Murphy and John Heidenreich—both of whom contracted the fever while caring for the ill of the parish.⁹ Their sacrifices became legendary.

Though their ministry to the most abandoned was well known, the Redemptorists were not the only clerics who confronted widespread disease. In 1918, across the nation, the lives of other Catholic clergy were upended—not merely because of closed churches, but because so many were counted among the victims. In Brooklyn, the diocesan newspaper, *The Tablet*, ran several headlines announcing the deaths of local clergymen, as well as praising the work of sisters in the fight against the pandemic.¹⁰ Newspapers also carried the reactions of some clerics to the temporary shuttering of their churches. Father James Coyle, then pastor of St. Paul’s Church—today the cathedral for the Diocese of Birmingham—wrote approvingly but realistically of his church’s closure: “The vigorous efforts made by the health authorities of our city to stamp out the epidemic is, in one form or another, working hardship and discomfort to every single citizen, and this hardship and discomfort is cheerfully endured for the universal good.”¹¹ In Philadelphia, the spirit of sacrifice was echoed by Monsignor Henry Drumgoole, rector of St. Charles Seminary: “Every one of us who carry out

God’s law is obliged in conscience to do his bit for the honor of the country and there should be no slacking or shrinking.”¹²

For vowed religious, the record of their contributions to service in the trenches was not without cost. In Philadelphia, the first woman religious to die of the flu was Sr. Catherine McBride, a Sister of St. Joseph, who was among the first of some 2,200 women religious in the archdiocese to answer an appeal to assist in nursing the sick.¹³ Philadelphia’s inordinately large number of fatalities mark it as among the most catastrophic sites in America. An Italian-American poet then residing in the city composed a long poem, “Deprecatio,” in which he concluded each stanza with a Latin plea: “A peste, fame et bello, libera nos, Domine” (From disease, famine and war, deliver us, Lord). One historian noted that it “tore at the fabric of the entire city.” Of the 49,000 cases, between 13,500 and 17,000 died in 1918—a figure higher than the total number of Philadelphians who died on foreign battlefields during the war.¹⁴

Redemptorists at St. Peter the Apostle, Philadelphia

As far as one can tell from the records left behind by Redemptorists of a century ago, the scourge of the flu left little impression on the people of St. Peter the Apostle. The Archive of the City of

⁹ Byron J. Krieger, *Seventy-Five Years of Service* (New Orleans: Redemptorist Fathers, 1923), 27-40. For the obituaries of these men, see “Death of Rev. Francis Murphy” and “Death of Rev. John Heidenreich,” in Peter Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province, vol. 1, 1875-1891* (St. Louis: St. Louis Province of the Redemptorists, 1924), 43-44.

¹⁰ See Ed Wilkinson, “1918 Headlines Tell of Battle Against Spanish Flu,” *The Tablet* (April 11, 2020): 16-17.

¹¹ See “Message to Catholics,” *Birmingham Herald* (October 1918), online at [https://www.al.com/coronavirus/2020/04/priest-supported-closing-churches-during-1918-flu-](https://www.al.com/coronavirus/2020/04/priest-supported-closing-churches-during-1918-flu-pandemic.html?fbclid=IwAR28KSO0_ESfX2Uk4-m6MUpmxHTLNuqVQy9CiaGAYMUiuvcWjFbG0Pi4qM)

[pandemic.html?fbclid=IwAR28KSO0_ESfX2Uk4-m6MUpmxHTLNuqVQy9CiaGAYMUiuvcWjFbG0Pi4qM](https://www.al.com/coronavirus/2020/04/priest-supported-closing-churches-during-1918-flu-pandemic.html?fbclid=IwAR28KSO0_ESfX2Uk4-m6MUpmxHTLNuqVQy9CiaGAYMUiuvcWjFbG0Pi4qM)

¹² Cited in Eileen Dougherty Troxell, *The History of Saint Malachy’s* (Ardmore, PA: Fifth Season Press, 2001), 45.

¹³ “Sister Mary Catharine Former Miss Margaret McBride is Martyr [*sic*, Martyr] to Nursing Duty,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (October 27, 1918): 11.

¹⁴ Isoleri’s poem and the casualty figures are cited in Richard N. Juliani, *Priest, Parish and People: Saving the Faith in Philadelphia’s “Little Italy”* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 268.

Philadelphia, however, is a gold mine of social history. To gauge the numbers of casualties in the parish at the height of the influenza's reach, one would have to consult the records at Holy Redeemer Cemetery, which we leave to another more suitable time. However, the parish files contain the annual report for the year 1918. In that year, there were 125 adult funerals (only three without benefit of the sacraments), and over sixty funerals of children. That may seem high, but it was not an unusual year for a parish of this size (about 8000 people). The house annals for the years 1905-1920 are the only day-to-day record. Even with the chronicle, there are few sources from which to draw out the history of this moment in the parish's history.

Of local interest, in July of 1918, the diocese welcomed its new archbishop, Denis J. Dougherty. There was a parade down Broad Street and the St. Peter's community turned out in full force, accompanied by its Fife and Bugle Corps. The next day, July 10,



all the priests attended Dougherty's installation at the cathedral.

Archbishop Denis J. Dougherty's passport photo.

During the month of August came the usual complaints about the heat index. The city's weather was "oppressive"--August 7 was especially bad. The chronicler mentioned that the mercury reached its highest peak in recorded history: 106 degrees. What did Father Rector do? He went to Atlantic City to escape the heat!

The summer faded into fall. School opened as usual, albeit with 1,200 scholars, a decline in numbers significant enough to catch the attention of the house chronicler. That included about 75 new students, with the expectation that parents returning from vacation would begin to send their kids and so increase the student body. In fact, later in the month, the figure jumped up to 1,410. On September 8, the parish held a patriotic demonstration, in part to let the city know of this German parish's American loyalties, but also to highlight the sacrifices of the 307 young men of the parish who were drafted into war service.

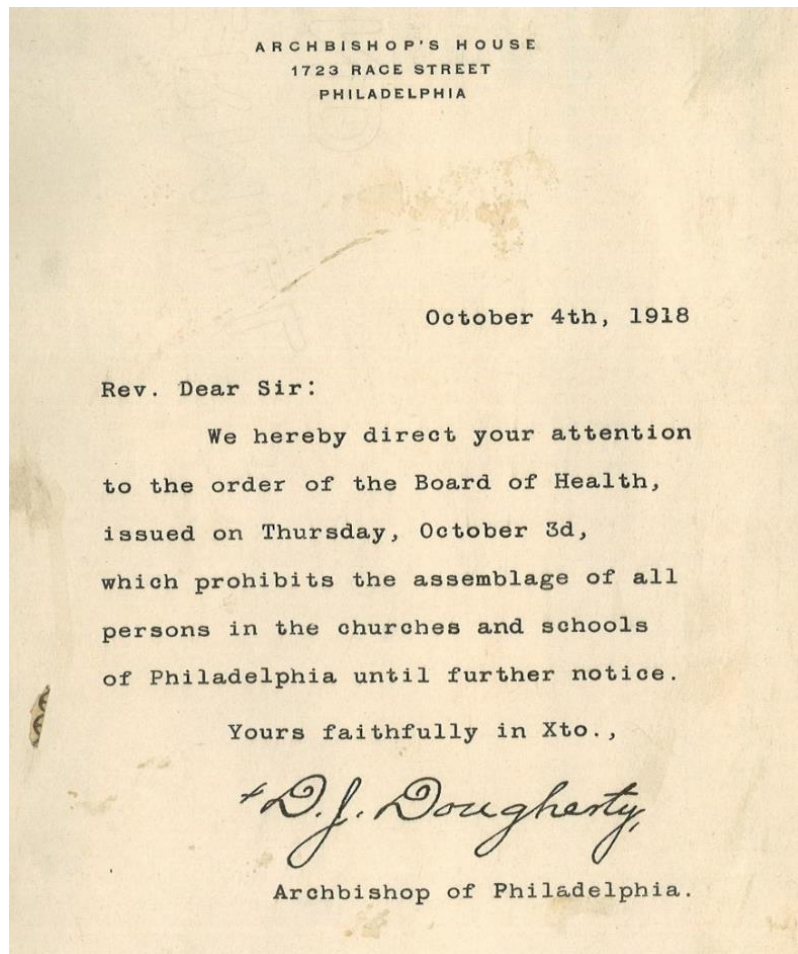
Things were all very normal, but on September 25 there was a bit of excitement in the house. On that evening the fathers held a dinner for Captain James Raby,

Archbishop Denis J. Dougherty, c. 1918. Library of Congress photo.

a distinguished commander of the Battleship *Missouri* and one of the most prominent Catholic commanders in the Navy.¹⁵ Though there was probably no connection, the flu entered Philadelphia on September 19 at the Navy Yard, where the *Missouri* was docked and where at least one chief yeoman would fall victim to the contagion.¹⁶ Not only were the parish priests there, the provincial and his council also attended. The most distressing aspect of the dinner, however, was mentioned by the chronicler: Father Francis Bitterer "gets a sudden attack of nose-bleed and severe chills, symptoms of the 'Flu.'" He was among the first Redemptorists in the province to take ill.

Though it was not mentioned in the house chronicle, nearly 200,000 people in Philadelphia participated in a Liberty Loan demonstration and parade on September 28. Thousands attended and, consequently, the pestilence spread among the crowds. Within days the city morgue, which was built to house 36 bodies, was overwhelmed with hundreds. City health officials began a series of measures to mitigate the spread, including a shelter-in-place order to keep the sick at home. Police became part of the city's medical response, mainly by ferrying doctors to the residences of the sick and delivering prescriptions from pharmacies to the infirm. About a quarter of the city's medical

professionals were engaged in war work, which left the region vulnerable to understaffing. Many stricken with flu became too sick to stay home or they were infecting their families and were forced to be admitted to area hospitals, which quickly ran out of beds. Chaotic scenes at these facilities were made more complicated by the back up of corpses waiting to be picked up for burial. For Catholic cemeteries, not enough grave diggers were on the payroll to bury all of the dead, so Archbishop Dougherty deployed 200 volunteer



¹⁵ Raby and his nephew, James Callaghan, were close to the Redemptorists. See the biography of Father Francis X. Murphy, C.Ss.R., *The Fighting Admiral: The Story of Dan Callaghan* (New York: Vantage Press, 1952).

¹⁶ Chief Yeoman Earl Downey, who was assigned to the *Missouri*, died of the influenza-pneumonia in Philadelphia on September 30. See Minnie Elizabeth Wycoff, *Ripley County's Part in the World War, 1917-1918* (Batesville, IN: Ripley County Historical Society, 1920), 361.

seminarians to assist at the cemeteries around the Archdiocese.

October was the hardest month in the country for the battle with the flu. At St. Peter's, the house chronicler's entries for that month are given here without comment, other than to say that living through the experience must have been very dramatic. October 3. Owing to the rapid spread of the Spanish Influenza all churches were ordered closed today. At 7:30 PM Rev. F[ather]. Rector announced the tidings to the people gathered in church. The people took it very hard, especially with the next day being the first Friday of the month, they will be unable to receive Holy Communion. So far, our district has not been hit very hard but in some sections of the city the mortality rate is very high.

October 5. Word arrived today from Archbishop Dougherty urging clergy to conform to the orders of the Board of Health and to keep both church and school closed till further notice.¹⁷ We received news that Rev. Father [Emil] Deuser was sent to St. Mary's Hospital, a victim of the Spanish Influenza. Rev. Father Bitterer of this community has also fallen a victim of the epidemic and is confined to bed.

October 6. Today (Sunday) church remained locked all day. The epidemic is spreading at a most alarming rate. Doctors, nurses, druggists have been working day and night. The hospitals are overfilled. The city

authorities are forced to put up emergency hospitals. So many people have died of the epidemic that the coffins are carted out to the cemetery as fast as possible and left there unburied until graves can be dug for them.

October 11. We received word from St. Boniface Church that Rev. Emil Deuser, C.Ss.R., succumbed to the epidemic.¹⁸ He died in St. Mary's Hospital at 8:15 PM. The funeral will be private owing to the orders of the municipal authorities to keep all churches closed.

October 12. Rev. Father Bitterer, who has been confined to bed for over 2 weeks with the Spanish Influenza went to Atlantic City today to recover his health and strength. [Redemptorists had a parish there at the time.]

October 13. Today, Sunday, the church remained locked all day. Archbishop Dougherty has requested all non-cloistered sisterhoods of the diocese to serve as nurses in the emergency hospitals. Four of our Sisters from St. Peter's School have volunteered for this noble work.

October 20. The epidemic is still raging with unabated fury. Over 5000 succumbed in Philadelphia during the past week. Church remained closed all day.

October 27. The church has opened again today for public services.¹⁹ The usual Sunday services were held with the exception of Sunday School which was

¹⁷ Curiously, the rector closed the church on October 4 in fulfillment of the civil authority's directive but made the announcement ahead of receiving word from Archbishop Dougherty. Dougherty's letter to pastors is dated October 4. Archbishop Dougherty's letter may be found in the online exhibit on "The Spanish Lady" arranged by the Philadelphia Archdiocese Catholic History Research Center, <https://omeka.chrc-phila.org/exhibits/show/flu/flu>.

¹⁸ Rev. Emil W. Deuser was born in Murgentheim, Wuerttemberg, Germany. At age 20, he entered the juvenate first at Saratoga, NY and then finished his preparatory training at St. Mary's, North East, PA. Professed at Annapolis on August 2, 1896, he was

ordained on December 6, 1901 in Ilchester, MD. His priestly ministry was in the parochial apostolate, first at Holy Redeemer, New York City (1902-1903); St. Boniface, Philadelphia (1903-1904); St. Michael's, Baltimore (1904-1912); Sacred Heart, Baltimore (1912-1917); and finally St. Boniface, Philadelphia (1917-1918). Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province (hereafter RABP), Personalia, Deuser. For more on Father Deuser's fate, see below.

¹⁹ Archbishop Dougherty lifted the church closure order on October 26 but kept the school closures in place until November 4 out of an abundance of caution.

prohibited by order of the Board of Health. Although the municipal authorities permitted the opening of schools tomorrow, Archbishop Dougherty sent word not to open the parochial schools until Nov. 4th. The epidemic is on the wane, still, the danger is by no means over. Many new cases are reported daily.

[On November 7, news of the Armistice arrived with much celebration throughout the parish and the whole city]

November 10. Our school was opened

November 11. [Official news of the armistice arrived early in the morning about 3 am and the city again went into a frenzy, with factory whistles blowing and people filling the streets. "Nobody went to work. Over 3/4 of the school children failed to appear. Everyone did just as he felt like. ... We promptly hoisted all our flags on rectory, school, and hall."]

There are no other entries that speak of the flu of 1918. Although the entry for October 13 speaks of the four brave School



The announcing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, was the occasion for a monster celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Thousands massed on all sides of the replica of the Statue of Liberty on Broad Street, and cheered unceasingly. Philadelphia Public Ledger, 1917 – 1919; National Archives photo.

again on November the 4th just a month after it was closed on account of the epidemic.

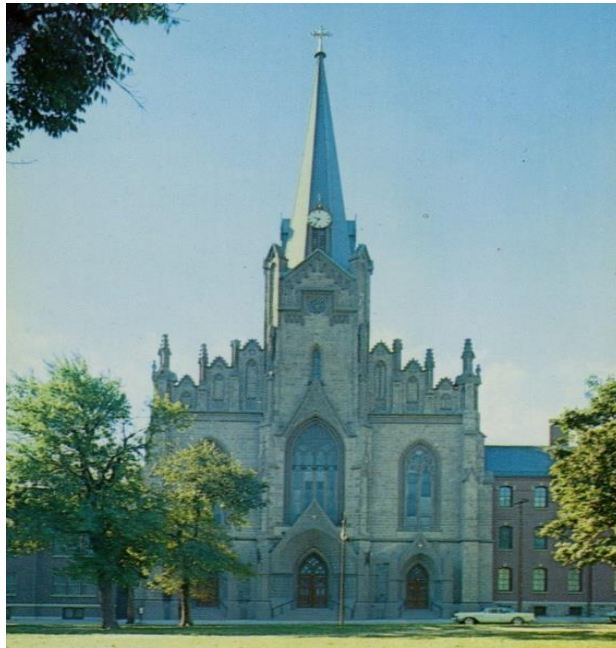
Sisters of Notre Dame who went out in response to the Archbishop's plea, they remain nameless. The chronicler also is misinformed about the number. Fortunately, the house chronicle for the School Sisters' convent at St. Peter's makes the names of these courageous women available. The provincial superior, Reverend Mother Agnes, actually freed five sisters to attend the sick at City Hospital. They were Sisters M. Alfred, M. Evangelista, M. LaSalette, M.

Irma, and the local superior, M. Dolorosa. According the convent chronicles,

On Friday evening, Oct. 13, they went to the City Hospital on 18th and Cherry Streets. The first thing they saw was the body of a man who had just died. Another one sat next to the bed waiting for the bed to be made up for him. When we reached our place of work we found the body of a woman who a few minutes before had died in the presence of our sisters from St. Boniface.” With death surrounding them, they took account of the needs on that first night and set to work. “In this room also were 6 other patients. A very ill Lutheran woman attracted the attention of Sister Dolorosa and soon she noticed that the end was near. She talked to her about accepting the will of God in case He wanted to call her home and she was astonished to hear that she wanted to die instead of becoming well again. Then the Sister prepared the patient for death by acts of contrition and acceptance of the will of God, etc. The patient became calm and Sister noticed that the breathing had stopped. Her soul had gone to God. Opposite her lay a small boy. The poor boy cried unceasingly in spite of all possible attention from the doctors. By 4 a.m. the little boy sufferer, too, had gone to God.” In that one room, the sisters accompanied several people to their death. At 8 o’clock in the morning, their shift ended, and they returned to their convent. The next day the sisters did not report any casualties and tried to alleviate the sufferings of the

patients as best they could. When they returned on the third morning, Sister Dolorosa reported that she was not well and indeed, she was felled by the flu. It quickly developed into pneumonia and she was anointed. By the feast of All Saints (November 1), however, she revived.²⁰

Several of the sisters from St. Peter’s convent also helped their sisters at the St. Vincent Orphanage Asylum in Tacony, Pennsylvania. This orphanage, originally for German Catholic children and approved by St. John Neumann, had in 1918 about 160 youngsters in the care of the School Sisters. With their aid, they managed to weather the epidemic with only two children among the city’s fatalities, though about 120 of the children and several of the sisters were laid up by the flu over the course of several weeks. By November 4, the convent annals attest, “everything breathed again.”²¹



The exterior of St. Boniface Church. RABP

²⁰ Convent annals, St. Peter the Apostle, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in School Sisters of Notre Dame Archive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

²¹ Convent annals, St. Vincent Orphan Asylum, Tacony, Pennsylvania, in School Sisters of Notre Dame Archive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Redemptorists at St. Boniface, Philadelphia

In nearby St. Boniface, the names of the sisters unfortunately are lost to history. They are not even recorded in the convent chronicles. However, their service is not neglected. “For 10 full days eight of our Sisters proved their spirit of courage and sacrifice in the Holmesburg Emergency Hospital. In this community also, our dear Lord asked for a victim; our dear Sister Marian Hortence Gerstner died within five days of pneumonia, and as she had been suffering from heart trouble for years, death came quickly.”²²

The fate of the Redemptorists at St. Boniface is noted, but also with spare detail. A letter comes down to us from the rector of St. Boniface, Father Joseph Wissel (a native of the parish of St. Peter’s and the only Redemptorist ever to be ordained in the church here...by none other than St. John Neumann), to the provincial, Father Joseph Schneider, describing the scene in the city:

October 8, 1918

Very Reverend and Dear Father:

The epidemic here is frightful. All churches, schools, theaters, and saloons closed. The physicians cannot cope with the conditions. We are overcome with sick calls, which come in twos and threes at a time [sic]. Sometimes even 2 and in one case even 3 were anointed in the same family. Father Englert is down with the “flu” as it is called here, but is improving; he is still in bed. Father

Deuser came home from Glen Riddle last Wednesday night with chills and fever--a genuine case of the “flu.” [Deuser was the weekly confessor to the Franciscan Sisters of Philadelphia motherhouse] The doctor was called at once who ordered him off at once to St. Mary’s Hospital.²³ All night they worked over him, keeping him wrapped in hot bandages to induce sweat. They only succeeded the next day to make him sweat. They purged him and did all to prevent pneumonia from setting in. But they did not succeed. A Father went up every day to see him. Yesterday afternoon they tried to get us by phone but could not until last night. He wanted to see Father Lorenz. Then we found out that he had a sudden choking spell to get up the phlegm, and that was the reason the sister sent for us but could not get us. The chaplain went to see him and decided to give him extreme unction. This morning I called to see how he is getting along. The temperature during the night was a fraction over 102 and he was rather flighty. The news this morning was not encouraging. He finds great difficulty to get rid of the phlegm. There seems to be no let up on the scourge.²⁴

Both before and after Wissel’s letter, the chronicler at St. Boniface spoke of the events of that October. Like the community at St. Peter’s, St. Boniface—about a mile north in Norris Square—the days leading to that fateful month were altogether normal.

²² Convent annals, St. Boniface, Philadelphia, in School Sisters of Notre Dame Archive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

²³ St. Mary’s Hospital, Philadelphia, was tended by the Redemptorists as resident chaplains for the previous 40 years. In July 1918, the hospital

chaplaincy was transferred to the fathers residing at St. Peter the Apostle. See the Provincial Consultation Book for July 1918, in RABP.

²⁴ Rev. Joseph Wissel to Father Provincial Joseph Schneider, October 8, 1918, in RABP, Localia: Philadelphia, St. Boniface, 1918.

On September 24, Father Deuser is reported to have assisted at the close of the 40 Hours

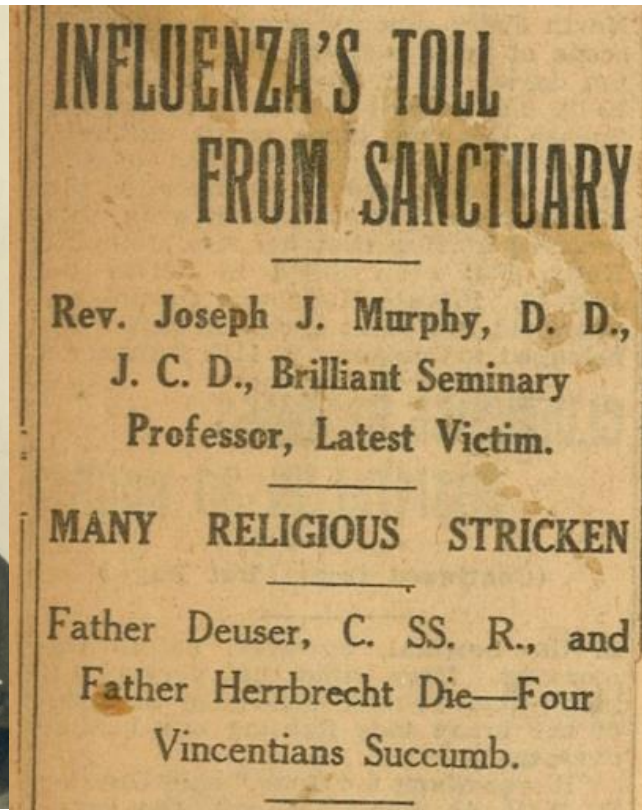


Rev. Joseph Wissel, C.Ss.R., pastor of St. Boniface. RABP photo.

Devotion at the little church of All Saints, in the Bridesburg section of Philadelphia, where they ministered with some frequency. The very next entry describes his return from Glen Riddle on October 1, but the chronicler notes that he came back with chills and a fever: “a very sick man.” After being ordered to his room, and upon a certain Dr. Rodener’s recommendation, Deuser was transported by ambulance to St. Mary’s Hospital in Fishtown. Ironically, this institution was founded by the very group of sisters whom Deuser served as confessor.

When Deuser presented himself, the chronicler noted that “the hospital authorities could give us no hopes one way or the other as to his chances of recovery.”

As the month went on, the chronicler got more graphic. Given the rate of infection, there was “scarcely a street on which one or the other crepe does not decorate the door.” On the eve of First Friday, October 3, confessions were heard all afternoon, but at 5 o’clock “an officer of the Law put in his appearance and communicated to us the Order of the Board of Health that all places of public gathering be closed till further orders. This order went into effect at 6 PM. Accordingly, we promptly locked the Church and placed on both side doors posters to that effect.” The next day he spoke of the “dismal silence” in church. People who came for Mass were turned away. “We said Mass in the Church but no one outside the Altar boys and the Angels were present at the august sacrifice.” By October 7, another of the community’s priests, Fr. John Englert, had come down with a mild form of the flu. Priests took turns visiting with Fr. Deuser and none reported that he seemed to improve. Another one of the St. Boniface priests, Fr. Sebastian Briehof, took Father Deuser’s place and went out to Glen Riddle to hear confessions of the Sisters of St. Francis. On the same day the chronicler reported that Deuser’s lungs were filling rapidly and the community was informed that he had a slim chance of surviving his “bad cold.” On October 10, two others in the St. Boniface house were felled by the contagion—Fr. Francis Parr and Brother Felix Dobrozemsky, who left the Redemptorists a few months later.



Fr. Emil Deuser, C.Ss.R. RABP photo.

According to the Redemptorist chronicler, on the evening of October 11, Fr. Deuser died “fortified by the rights [sic] of the Church and having renewed his religious vows.” On that afternoon, both the rector, Father Wissel and Father Breihof, attended him.

When he died, the undertaker collected the body and brought it back to the Redemptorists’ convent at 144 Diamond Street, where it lay for the benefit of Deuser’s immediate family: his aged mother, and his brother and sister. His funeral was celebrated privately and he was buried on October 15 in Holy Redeemer Cemetery in Philadelphia. Days later, his death was noted in the *Catholic Spirit and Times*, along with a notable professor from

the seminary and other clergy, including four Vincentians.²⁵ Clipping from the Philadelphia Archdiocese Catholic History Research Center, Philadelphia.

The chronicler described the influenza’s continued “rage with virulence.” The numbers of deaths in the city were happening “so fast that the undertakers are working day and night to dispose of the corpses. The most Rev. Archbishop has sent 200 Overbrook students to help dig graves; even this was not sufficient to bury the dead. A Catholic contractor gave his services with a steam shovel to dig trenches, in which the coffins were place side by side and then filled up in the same way. In our cemetery [Holy Redeemer], the caskets were standing there a dozen at a time, waiting for their turn to be consigned to the grave. We had to

²⁵ See “Influenza’s Toll From Sanctuary,” *Catholic Standard and Times* (October 19, 1918) *Catholic Historical Research Center Digital Collections*,

accessed April 23, 2020, <https://omeka.chrc-philadelphia.org/items/show/7413>.

procure our own grave digger for Father Deuser's funeral."

In mid-October, the priests were more or less spent. Father Wissel petitioned to the community in Ephrata to send relief. Father Alphonse Wolf answered the call and almost immediately after his arrival was sent to Glen Riddle to confess the Franciscan sisters, "as none of the community were as yet in a fit condition to tend to that strenuous task." An additional confrere, Fr. Alfred Menth, joined the community a week later to take the place of Father Deuser. On October 27, shortly after he arrived, the Board of Health rescinded its order to close churches and operations began as usual.

So, the fall of 1918 was probably one that toughened their mettle--of both the priests and the people--but it was a great relief when it was over. There is no special mention of anything like a novena or special set of prayers that were said to Venerable John Neumann at this time, though his postulation was continuing.

Compared to other sectors of the Redemptorists' Baltimore Province, the community at St. Peter's got off lucky. The hardest hit, in terms of the numbers of cases, was the Redemptorists' major seminary at Mt. St. Alphonsus in Esopus, New York.

The Flu at Mount St. Alphonsus, Esopus, NY

The Redemptorist major seminary at Esopus, New York, supplies a bit more detail on what became the largest outbreak of influenza in the province. The student annals for the years 1915-1920 are missing. The house chronicle, kept by the faculty, is intact and, oddly, labeled "Student Annals Esopus 1915-1923" with the word "Student" hastily erased. Of local interest, right from the beginning of 1918, we find that Mother Frances Cabrini was buried in West Park at her sisters' convent on January 2. The Redemptorists were there to celebrate the

funeral liturgy and commendation at the grave site. The rector, Fr. Francis Fischer, was the officiant. Mother Cabrini, now a saint, died in Chicago on December 22, though not from the flu.

Later that summer, on the feast of St. Alphonsus, the Mount had two visitors—a Major Edward Barrett and Miss Donohue, a representative of the National Catholic War Council. Both intended on inspecting the building for possible use as an army hospital. While the Major (a 33rd Degree Mason!) was permitted entry, the lady was asked to wait outside. When the provincial was informed about this, he began a telephone, telegraph, and letter writing campaign to scuttle the government's plan. It worked. Joseph P. Tumulty, President Wilson's private secretary and a leader in Irish Catholic politics, assisted in shifting the opinion of the Surgeon General. In about a week's time, the Secretary of War relented, assuring that the return of the student body in the fall could commence without incident.

The first sign that the flu made a significant impact on the Mount St. Alphonsus community was an entry dated October 12, 1918, when the chronicler noted that on that Columbus Day Sunday only three of the fathers went out to minister in nearby parishes. All the other churches where the Redemptorists "helped out" on Sunday were closed "on account of the Spanish Influenza which is raging throughout the country." This meant that at least ten men stayed home. Nevertheless, the annual grape and apple picking went on as scheduled.

On October 22, a Frater Gallery left for the Kingston Hospital with a case of the "Flux." A certain foreboding accompanied this entry for that day, but the chronicler also signals the reliance the Redemptorists had on their physician: "the doctor is afraid of pneumonia." This began a torrent of other

cases. So, the next entry, for October 26, reads: "R. P. [Francis] Connell goes to bed with the 'Flu.' Three of the students go down with it. Fr. [Patrick] Leonard sends to Albany for 'serum' in order to inoculate the students against Spanish 'Flu'." Of course, by then it was too late.

On October 28 classes at the Mount were cancelled and the rules for the cloister were suspended so that two female nurses could be admitted to attend to the students.²⁶ This is noted also in the house chronicle. By then, "about 12 students and 3 brothers have it. All the sick students have been moved to the infirmary and two women nurses from the Benedictine Hospital have come to take care of them. Dr. O'Meara insisted on this arrangement so Fr. Rector telegraphed to Fr. Provincial and the latter sent back the necessary permission. The last sacraments were administered to Fr. D. Murphy; his temperature was 105. All the others are spending their time outside, raking leaves, etc." The next day, with classes again suspended, five more students "go down." Classes did not resume for another several days.

Mass was the heart of the Mount experience, both for the students and the teaching fathers. The days of October yielded to November and in the first days of that month are two important feast days: All Saints (Nov. 1) and All Souls (Nov. 2). Due to the sickness, the fathers adjusted their Masses accordingly, celebrating them at staggered hours so as not to contract or spread the illness. Today there are some rather unique and creative rules on how to avoid COVID-19 by not touching hard surfaces or one's face. Back then, in 1918, there were no such rules in place and so contagion from touching an altar, communing others on the tongue, or ministering near someone who had a cough

or sneeze could spell trouble. Local churches remained closed, except for the little chapel in Port Ewan, which was administered by the Redemptorists.

By November 4, the chronicler reported that "all the students are doing nicely," but that one of the nurses, Miss Van Fleet, had contracted the flu. Classes did not resume until November 11--an auspicious day because news was received at the Mount that the Germans had signed the Armistice. The chronicler notes that the Mount community contributed their joy at this news by ringing the bells. That evening they all sang the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for peace. Despite the good cheer, twenty students were still "down with the flu," but the worst was behind them. Not all were out of the woods, though. By November 26, the chronicler noted that a Miss Kayne or Koyné, one of the nurses, had remained with two of the students who had developed pneumonia. She sacrificed her Thanksgiving holiday to be with them. On the 26th, she departed. All told, during this period, there were 57 cases, including four professors.

Conclusion

Around the rest of the province, the situation seemed less dire. In Saratoga Springs, for instance, Father Richard Donohoe was rector. He left for Boston on business and then vacation, not planning to return until October 12. Meanwhile, the fathers at Saratoga took the warnings of civil authorities as mere suggestions. "Schools and churches have been closed in many states," the chronicler wrote on October 7. "In town all the schools have been closed but the churches are allowed to remain open with no public services. This is done by the Board of Health. We so interpret the order for 'no public services' that the people may

²⁶ See *A Centenary of Blessings, 1907-2007* (Esopus, NY: Mt. St. Alphonsus, 2007), 68.

come if they wish.” The community seemed to pass through the flu’s clutches unscathed until October 26, when the physician was called to confirm that Father Louis Smith had contracted the illness. The next day, the Saratoga Board of Health re-opened the city’s schools. By November 14, Father Smith was back on his feet, “though somewhat feeble.”

There was no repeating the tragedy that befell the student body in Esopus when compared with the toll in North East, Pennsylvania. At St. Mary’s College, the juniorate did battle with the flu, but thanks to precautionary measures—including the expansion of the infirmary, lots of outdoor activities, and implementation of increased hygienic procedures—the student population was spared the worst. Just 30 cases were reported, and the boys were attended faithfully by four sisters from St. Vincent’s in Erie. Elsewhere, the attention of the provincial was turned toward the earthquake in Puerto Rico that October or the continued requests for military chaplains, which tended to deplete the parochial rank and file. He was also keeping up with the deliberations of a local tribunal in Philadelphia, which had assembled to examine witnesses to a miracle of then-Servant of God, John Neumann.

This is not to say that the remaining units in the Baltimore Province were minimally affected. Indeed, Father Augustine Dooper, while on a visit from Boston to the Bronx, spoke to the fathers there of what was happening at the Mission Church. An entry in the Bronx’s Immaculate Conception chronicles

relates that for the previous two weeks, the Redemptorists’ Mission Church had 361 sick calls, fifty funerals at the Church and ten funerals in a single home nearby.²⁷ Unlike today’s response to the COVID-19 epidemic, however, both of the churches in Boston and the Bronx remained open, without any interruption of sacramental service. Indeed, for some urban churches like Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Manhattan, there was nothing so dire that the parish should cancel its Liberty Loan parade sponsored by the Knights of Columbus or that its rosary circle should not gather to pray.

Father Augustine Dooper, RABP photo.



²⁷ The house chronicles for the Mission Church, Boston, tell a slightly different story. The entry for October 8, 1918 states that “from Sept. 15 to Oct. 1 according to the office record there were 58 funerals. We know of nine cases where the bodies were not

brought to the Church. The ‘Sick Call Record’ gives the record of 280 sick-calls from Sept. 1 to Oct. 1.” See Mission Church, Boston, chronicles, 1918-1923, in Redemptorist Archives, Philadelphia.

At Sacred Heart of Jesus in Baltimore, families were still permitted to come to the church for baptisms “privately, by way of [the] parlor.” Funerals for parishioners there—which amounted to about five to six each day during the epidemic’s high point—took place inside private homes and, sometimes, the priest would accompany the family to the cemetery. There was no thought given to social distancing or a strict stay-at-home policy. These lessons would come only after generations of epidemiological study and training on the administration of the sacraments.

Part II, Redemptorists and the Spanish Flu, 1918: The St. Louis Province

The data has been crunched. The Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918 killed about 700,000 Americans. In Philadelphia, where the flu was particularly virulent, a person died of the flu every five minutes. At its worst, over 800 people died on a single day in that city.²⁸ Though the scene could be replicated on a smaller scale in other American cities, the pandemic’s body count



Red Cross Ambulance Corps, St. Louis, MO, 1918. Library of Congress photo.

28 See Jeff Gammage, “‘Spit Spreads Death’: A mournful march commemorates 1918 flu that killed 20,000 in Philly,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (September 28, 2019), available online at

<https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/spit-spreads-death-flu-pandemic-epidemic-philly-mutter-museum-20190929.html>.

still played second fiddle to the tragedy of the war in Europe.

Across the United States, similar figures tolled a gruesome and ignominious end for thousands. For Redemptorists in the western province of St. Louis, with its eighteen foundations spreading from Detroit to Fresno, the influenza's reach was an immediate reality. The men themselves suffered and some died. Their demise had far-reaching pastoral implications.

This essay tries to shed light on how the flu affected the province, both in a survey of the different locales, but also through an examination of the lives lost. We proceed in a kind of rapid fire, acknowledging the limits of the research. There are accounts of how the confreres met the challenges of sickness and death, both in the houses and in their parishes, but there is no sustained reflection on the experience. Some of the research is hampered by the fact that important sources are no longer extant. Missing data is complicated by the lack of additional source material, either in the contemporary newspapers of the time, or in parish histories. Frequently, this crucial moment in American social history is handicapped by the people living through it. They are too busy or not invested enough to jot down their experience. We are impoverished for it. Nevertheless, many Redemptorist houses have left us some scraps for the narrative that follows.²⁹

From East to West

The chatty house chronicler at Detroit's Holy Redeemer parish, Father James Coll,

did not seem alarmed by the arrival of the flu in his city. That is because it went unannounced. On October 1, Detroit's first fatality linked to the flu went unreported and the health commissioner did not think to mention it in any public venue. Two days later, however, the *Detroit Free Press* announced the presence of at least fifty suspected cases in the city. In another two days, the figure leapt to 185 cases. Still the health department remained silent. But by October 6, public school teachers were checking their students for symptoms of the flu and employers excluded symptomatic employees from their shops. Dance halls were closed. Finally, the advice of the health department came to the fore: if you're sick, confine yourself to bed and get plenty of rest. And keep the bowels open.³⁰

The first sign of the flu in the presence of the Detroit community came on October 11, when the province mission band, comprised of Fathers Matt Meyer, Pregoner and Kennedy, decided to pause their missionary labors owing to the influenza's "startling proportions." Father Coll noted that in the evening Fathers Moye and Kennedy decided to "stick to the missionary ship and risk the waves of prohibition the Board of Health are threatening to let loose." He doesn't say when the pair left, but in the next entry, under date of October 17, he reported that "Fr. Meyer is here still, very still indeed. The 'Flue' has him on the broad of his back tonight. Dr. Starr is not at all pleased with the outlook." The next night was worse for poor Fr. Meyer, but on the following day the chronicler stated that he appeared to be doing better and that there

²⁹ As with part I of this series, the Redemptorist sources that I have relied on come in the form of house chronicles. Rather than include annotation for each reference to them, one may assume that direct quotations are from the chronicles found in the Redemptorist Archives of the Denver Province, according to the foundation city and site, for the year

1918. Months vary. See also the synopsis annual data for each unit found in Peter Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, vol. III, 1913-1922* (St. Louis: Redemptorists, 1924).

³⁰ See <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-detroit.html#>.

was “not any further danger expected.” Still, it took him until the 24th before he was able to rise and say Mass.

On October 19 the chronicles noted the headlines of the evening papers, which announced that the following day, Sunday, “all churches and ‘movies’ must remain closed till the Board of Health directs otherwise.” The laxity with which the fathers approached this order was in evidence on October 20 when, despite the church closure order, “quite a number of lay persons managed to get into the church but at one of the late masses they were unceremoniously ordered out by an officer who, evidently, was on the watch. Hence forth, the closing means hermetically sealed.” Over the next couple of weeks, the church remained shuttered. On October 24, the health authorities closed all schools, including Holy Redeemer’s. They would not reopen until November 4.

Like other cities around the nation, reports of a German surrender brought people out of their homes and into the streets. Congregating in jubilation, while understandable, was also an invitation for contagion. The premature announcement of the Armistice on November 7 was repeated “to the nth power” again on November 10, when the city erupted. “Detroit was asleep but after a few moments it seemed that it would never get to bed again. Fr. Hynes, a member of our staid community, pussy footed into the church and began to ring the bell. ... In the evening the folks round about this part of the city had a parade. The Holy Redeemer Red Cross Society quickly improvised a float, jammed it with girls and women and went out to let off some of their pent up enthusiasm.”

Catholics in Detroit had another important event that brought them into close proximity to one another. The new bishop of the Diocese of Detroit, Bishop Michael J. Gallagher, arrived at the Michigan Central

Depot to much fanfare. The chronicler reported that the local papers reported that 38,000 Catholics met him at the station, including scores of clergy. Holy Redeemer sent its Holy Name Society en masse, and several others carried a service flag with 919 stars—the number of men from the parish who served in the war. Bishop Gallagher was installed on November 19 and several Redemptorists attended both the ceremony and the banquet afterward. A few days later, on November 23, we find the following entry:

Ye humble annalist was struck down with the “Flu” today. It was of such a violent nature that he immediately took to his bed; a thing of course which he most heartily resented. From this date on begins the epidemic in this house. Six of the Frs. and one brother. [Peter O’Neil] Byrne, [James] Moye, [Marcellus] Ryan, [James] Dries, [John] Britz, Hynes and Bro. Lorenzo got their attacks in such order as to put them all on their backs at about the same time. It was necessary to get a lady to prepare the meals, but she didn’t stay with the job, so we were reduced to the sad alternative of getting our food prepared and sent—somewhat cooled—from Colby’s Kitchen. The sick calls from this date, too, became quite numerous and with tour working forces so depleted the fathers who were well were kept quite busy.

Though the flu passed with unpleasant effects, a serious case of pneumonia and eventually typhoid overtook Father Britz. He was brought to St. Mary’s Hospital on December 10. Three days later, his case beginning to look graver, his parents were

notified. He recovered but did not return from St. Mary's until January 13.



Fr. John Britz, RADP photo.

The Immaculate Conception Seminary in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, was nearly spared entanglements with the national epidemic. Father Geiermann's *Annals* state that "when the Influenza broke out, the Community

remained free of it, and the fathers assisted the pastors of the diocese."³¹ However, the first case to present in Oconomowoc occurred on December 17.³² On the 22nd, 33 students were confined to their rooms and several students, including Frater Arthur Froelich, were designated as "sick waiters." On the 23rd, he was taken ill, too. By Christmas only ten men were able to care for fifty others, all of whom were dispatched to their beds. Gradually, the student body came back to life so that on the day after Christmas some could be found in the fathers' library and common room. Two men lost their lives to the disease—Frater Patrick Brennan of the Toronto Province, and Frater Arthur Froelich, who expired on the 29th.³³ Several more were recipients of the last sacraments. After their burial in the new Redemptorist cemetery, the survivors were especially glum, though the student annalist in those days noted that some of the more boisterous of their number, together with the rector, attempted to rouse the spirits of the students through games and jokes in order "to distract the minds of the fratres." When Frater Froelich was finally laid to rest, in the presence of his

mother and brothers, his classmates tried their hand at pastoral care for the grieving family, which cheered them very much. From the library windows, the students who were still sick watched as their confrere was lowered into the cold Wisconsin ground. The whole episode made a deep impression,

³¹ Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province*, 301.

³² There is a discrepancy between what the Oconomowoc student annals report and what Father Geiermann states in his *Annals of the St. Louis Province*, loc cit. The student annals note December 17 as the beginning of the flu, whereas Fr. Geiermann has it as December 19.

³³ On Brennan, see below. Frater Arthur Froelich was a professed student from St. Louis. Born September

1, 1896, he attended St. Alphonsus (Rock) School as a boy and was an altar server at Church. A gifted student, he applied to St. Joseph's College in Kirkwood, Missouri, where in 1915 he obtained highest honors. He made his novitiate at DeSoto and professed vows on August 2, 1916. He had been studying dogma when he experienced the attack of influenza.

at least on the student chronicler: “The feelings of the students during the Mass and while the remains were being consigned to the earth can never be known. The students who looked on all these things have a reminder in their hearts that will cease only with death.” One other professed student succumbed due to the flu: Father John Power, another Canadian, who died on the morning of January 8, 1919, after a long agony of 41 hours.³⁴

For the students in Kirkwood, Missouri, the fall term began uneventfully. The September retreat was conducted without incident. Some Canadian students were brought for a few days visit and Father Joseph Hild spent ten days on site writing the provincial chronicle. Course work began in earnest on September 7. Several fathers left for missions that they would give in Illinois and other places east of the Mississippi. Father McGinn’s funeral on October 9 was the beginning of a long trial, not least because of stay-at-home orders. The fathers who would ordinarily go out for Sunday services or to preach missions were all house bound. On October 20 the facility’s water heater exploded. The next day, a fateful line is recorded in the house chronicle: “It seems as though the Influenza

has at last come to the college. Father Rector was in bed all day and Dr. Hansen said he had it. First student to be attacked is Germaine Sutton.” The provincial arrived to change the order of the day in light of the flu’s effects. “There will be no second class in the morning and each class will last only ¾ hours. No exercises in common. Free devotion instead of meditation or benediction. Meditation in the morning is in private.” The changes lasted but a week. The mundane entries that followed were punctuated by a series of lectures given by Dr. J. Godfrey Raupert on spiritualism³⁵ and the end of the war, but the chronicler also took note of the lifting of the influenza bans and the announcement that the churches were open again. “Hence we went out for our usual Sunday work.” This heralded a return to normalcy.

Life carried on placidly at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Kansas City, despite news of the influenza’s ravages two hours west at Camp Funston, in Fort Riley, Kansas. Just three days after the launch of the Liberty Loan drive on September 28, two of the city’s Army training schools had registered a thousand cases of the flu. Quickly, it seeped into the civilian population.³⁶

³⁴ Geiermann notes that Power was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on January 25, 1887. The youngest of seven, he was the brother of Father Edward Power, C.Ss.R. After an earlier education at St. Dunstan’s College, he took a position with the Bank of Nova Scotia for five years after his graduation. Eventually, he applied for admission to the St. Louis Province and was admitted to St. Joseph’s College, Kirkwood, Missouri, in January 1910. His novitiate was spent at DeSoto and he professed vows on August 2, 1915. He was a model student. Weather did not permit his brother to celebrate the obsequies and so Father Daniel Higgins, the rector of the studentate, celebrated the Requiem.

³⁵ See J. Godfrey Raupert, *The Dangers of Spiritualism: Being Records of Personal Experiences* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1914). The book went into several editions and was published both in America and Europe. Its principal target was the use of the

ouija board. Sir Godfrey was at this time making a tour of the United States at the invitation of the American hierarchy. He visited several Redemptorist communities, including the house in New Orleans, where he was obliged to stay during the height of the pandemic for nearly three months, during which time he was able to write undisturbed. See Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province*, 263.

³⁶ For the external ramifications of the flu in Kansas City, see <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-kansascity.html#>. Some public health authorities pressed city leaders to re-open their businesses and lift school closure orders in mid-October, without regard to the experience playing out in other municipalities. Logic did not always dictate policy. Indeed, one medical voice, Dr. A. J. Gannon, the director of the City Department of Contagious Diseases, noted the health benefits of onions and



Fr. Clement Wagner, RADP photo.

On October 6, the house chronicler for OLPH, Father Clement Wagner, noted that “over 15,000 soldiers were suffering at one time at Camp Funston,” but the urgency and dread could be seen the following day when he wrote that “the Influenza is running rampant throughout all the warring countries. According to military authorities, it is almost 60% fatal.” Daily, the worry occupied him so that the effects of the flu were all that he discussed. On October 8, the city announced school closures and “the closing of all churches is also threatened.” On October 9, “all the fall missions over the

garlic, if the low rates of flu among the city’s Italians were any indication. Perhaps not surprisingly, on

entire province have been canceled on account of the ‘Flu.’” Cancellations of the October devotions and the novena to Our Mother of Perpetual Help ensued. Missionaries who had been on the road returned home on account of public health authorities ceasing all large gatherings. Father Thomas Fagan, however, slipped out to Nebraska for “doubtful mission work.” The fathers of OLPH were observant of the letter of the law and kept the church closed, but on October 12 they held “four Masses on our lawns in the rear of the Church,” all of which were well attended.

The priests at OLPH were personally affected by the flu as well. Father Edward Mattingly and Peter Maas were both informed of the illnesses visited upon their siblings. Father Clement Wagner himself “answered the call for help from St. Mary’s Hospital to help in the influenza wards.” He remained on duty there between October 11 and October 25, but returned there on October 28, this time as a patient. He had come down with influenza and was rushed back for treatment. He returned, weakened, on November 4. The rest of the fathers continued their outdoor Sunday services, interrupted on the 27th, when the weather was rainy. The practice grew more surreptitious. On the feast of All Saints, two Masses were celebrated on the lawns at 6 and 7 a.m. because “health inspectors are not expected to rise so early.” Services resumed their normal schedule on November 10, but the schools remained closed indefinitely. Father Wagner noted that “many of the school children are sick with the influenza. In fact, whole families are down with it, and some were wiped out entirely.” As late as December 9, Brother Hubert Haunert presented with a case of the flu and was taken to St. Mary’s Hospital, where he stayed until December 22 battling

November 26, the city’s papers reported that Dr. Gannon had been relieved of his position.

a slight case of pneumonia. The school, which had been shuttered through December, finally opened again on January 2.

Denver's Redemptorist parish of St. Joseph was a complex about six blocks from the city's Department of Public Health and a busy county hospital. Though the fathers were not immune from the flu, they were not seriously affected. We lack detail because the house chronicles are not extant. The pages of the parish announcement book, however, are filled with activities for the week up to the church's closure between October 6 and November 9.³⁷ Spoken to all the assembled congregations at the conclusion of Mass, the announcements were a kind of life-line for parishioners who took part in the parish's social and communal life.

In late September, on the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, parishioners were alerted to the plans for October. As this was traditionally a Marian month, the recitation of the rosary would take place each morning after the 8 o'clock Mass. The First Friday devotions included exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. The married ladies' sodality would gather in church and include reception of communion. The following Sunday, a collection would be taken for the orphans of the diocese. All of these activities were cancelled, as were the Sunday Masses. By November 10, Sunday services were limited to the mornings and schools remained closed. The principal announcement for that day was that "we can make no announcements for next Sunday." Uncertainty still lingered.

Though St. Mary's Assumption in New Orleans was a powerhouse in Ecclesiastical Square, the fathers were often drawn to the homes of parishioners across the Irish Channel. The poor were in the vast majority

of the population. While the house chronicles for the period are not extant, we get a sense from Father Geiermann's province *Annals* that "during the Influenza epidemic the Fathers were kept very busy attending the sick and burying the dead. It was pathetic," he wrote, "to see persons dying without doctor, nurse, or medicine to relieve and save them. One of the Fathers described a home in which he administered the Sacraments to two young men and two young women, while a fifth member of the family had died, and was laid out for burial."³⁸ In the month of December, the fathers in New Orleans buried ten individuals each day.

The houses in Chicago—St. Michael's in Old Town and St. Alphonsus—had known well the sacrifices of 1918. From the beginning of the year, on the order of the Archbishop, parochial schools were closed in order to conserve coal. German-born members of the two houses had to register with the local police precinct. Within the parishes themselves, hundreds of young men had entered into the war effort. Indeed, the war was brought home to Chicago in the form of the flu. It entered the city through the first reported cases at Naval Station Great Lakes on September 7, 1918, two days after a "Nurses Parade" that drew thousands to the Loop's interior. Among the military personnel in the Chicago area, roughly 40 percent contracted the influenza virus.

St. Michael's made its parochial decisions based upon the guidance of the archbishop. In retrospect, one wonders about the strategies employed. For instance, Catholics could only gather together for Sunday Mass and even then, services could not last longer than 45 minutes. Nevertheless, the fathers at St. Michael's endured the pandemic relatively unscathed. Such was not the case at St. Alphonsus for,

³⁷ See RADP, Denver, St. Joseph's Announcement Book, 1915-1920.

³⁸ Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province*, 264.

soon after the flu broke out in Chicago, the following stricken:

Red Cross nurses march in a parade in Chicago on Sept. 5, 1918, on Red Cross Day at the U.S. Government War Exposition. Library of Congress photo.



Father Rector John Diedrich, who was hospitalized on October 4 with double pneumonia; Father Mathias Bregenzer, October 20; Father John Merke, October 26; Father Aloysius Liebl, November 4 (non-flu related ailment); and Father Joseph Reiser, November 7. All recovered. Still, the parish itself lost 50 people to the disease. On strategy that city officials employed was to keep the schools open. This controlled

environment allowed teachers to monitor flu-like symptoms in children and kept them out of homes where contagion was lurking, at least for part of the day.

It could have been worse for Chicago.³⁹ Though the contagion was mainly confined to the naval base, which quarantined by

September 17, the base commanders nevertheless permitted visitors on base. Predictably, by the end of the month, the city itself had at least 260 cases and those ballooned exponentially over the first week of October. Its growth was principally among those thought to have robust immune systems. For those between 20 and 40 years of age, the severity of the flu's effects in their cohort was

pronounced, in part owing to the immunological response of healthy organs to this unknown invader, which provoked a system-wide failure. Guidance came from Dr. John Dill Robertson, health commissioner for the city of Chicago, who prescribed bed rest, hot drinks, and quiet until the body was out of danger. Other health officials spearheaded an anti-spitting campaign and, like other

³⁹ For what follows, see Kori Rumore and Marianne Mather, "How the 1918 flu pandemic mirrors today's coronavirus crisis," *Chicago Tribune* (April 24, 2020), available at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-opinion-flashback-1918-flu-pandemic-timeline-htmlstory.html>



Illustration by W.E. Hill, "With all this influenza around, it was no time for the delivery boy at the other end of the car to choke on a chocolate almond and start coughing."

cities, deployed boy scouts to identify hacking culprits and to distribute warning cards to offenders. Despite their best efforts, Chicagoans probably suffered upwards of 50,000 cases of flu between 1918 and 1919. Many thought this was a public relations

disaster for the city and sought to downplay the high numbers. One physician cautioned against alarmism. "A disease that kills less than 1-200th of those it attacks is nothing to get in a funk about."⁴⁰ In the end, however, about 10,000 of the city's residents perished from influenza.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT
UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

INFLUENZA

Spread by Droplets sprayed from Nose and Throat

Cover each COUGH and SNEEZE with handkerchief.

Spread by contact.

AVOID CROWDS.

If possible, WALK TO WORK.

Do not spit on floor or sidewalk.

Do not use common drinking cups and common towels.

Avoid excessive fatigue.

If taken ill, go to bed and send for a doctor.

The above applies also to colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, and tuberculosis.

ANTI-SPITTING CAMPAIGN TO KEEP DOWN GRIP

First Deputy Superintendent of Police Morgan Collins yesterday offered a new suggestion which found favor in the city hall in connection with the contemplated renewal of the anti-spitting campaign during the threatened influenza epidemic.

The first deputy believes that stenciled sidewalk signs bearing the words "Don't Spit." would serve as a constant reminder to the careless and prove an effective deterrent.

"I notice that some western cities have adopted this plan," the first deputy said. "They have the stenciled words on the sidewalks at every street intersection."

Chief of Police Alcock said that the police are still "crusading" against the spitting nuisance as a result of a campaign made last spring.

"I have taken special notice only recently, and have seen no violations of the anti-spitting ordinance," he said.

(Library of Congress photo and *Chicago Tribune* story, Sept. 20, 1918)

⁴⁰ See Dr. W. A. Evans, "'Flu' causes and cures analyzed by Dr. W. A. Evans," and "Influenza cases

here estimated 40,000 to 60,000," *Chicago Tribune* (October 6, 1918), cited in Rumore and Mather, *ibid.*

IMPORTANT TO THE PUBLIC.

The following instructions were issued yesterday by Dr. Edward A. Ingham, local officer of the State Board of Health, and Dr. L. M. Powers, City Health Commissioner:

TO AVOID INFLUENZA.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoid the person who coughs or sneezes without covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief. 2. Avoid the person who spits where it will spread disease. He is dangerous as well as indecent. 3. Avoid crowds. They multiply your chances of catching influenza. 4. When you cannot avoid crowded places keep your mouth shut and breathe through your nose. 5. If you see a person with red, watery eyes who is sneezing or blowing his nose stay away from him. 6. If any of your friends have a cold or are sick with influenza, do not associate with them. 7. Stay out of doors as much 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Keep all of your rooms well ventilated. 9. Avoid getting chilled when you are warm from work or other exercises. 10. Avoid dusty places. Dust irritates the nose and throat and makes it easy for you to catch influenza. 11. If smoking irritates your throat stop it for the same reason as above. 12. Drink plenty of water. 13. Eat enough, but not too much. 14. Keep your bowels open. 15. If you wish to use additional precautions ask your doctor.
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IF YOU CATCH INFLUENZA.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you feel feverish and have a headache, backache, or cold in your head, consult a doctor at once. 2. Stay in bed until you are absolutely well—at least three days. 3. If you have influenza or any cold, avoid giving it to your family, friends and others. 4. Never cough or sneeze without covering your nose and 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> mouth with a handkerchief. 5. Do not spit on sidewalks, floors, street cars, or places where germs will spread. 6. Boil your handkerchiefs after they are washed. 7. Keep your rooms well ventilated. 8. Eat enough plain food, but not too much. 9. Drink plenty of water. 10. Keep your bowels open.
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the directives of Bishop John Cantwell to have exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in all religious houses. This might have been an occasion for congregation and spread of the flu, but all members of the community were spared except for one of the missionaries, Father Henry Phillips, who contracted the illness while giving a retreat in San Francisco. He was hospitalized and did not return home until after the Christmas holidays. Although Father Molloy left no written record of the trials that the community underwent, the province annals give some clue. Missionary activity was curtailed that fall, though Father John Fitzgerald managed to give two retreats—one for nurses in Sacramento and another to a group of sisters in Los Angeles during the month of October. Though travel restrictions were unheard of during the epidemic, the fathers were more or less self-contained and kept their distance

from people, as did most people in Fresno. This kept the deadly virus at bay and mortality was relatively low through the whole city.⁴² How did this happen?

On the West Coast, the Redemptorist foundations in operation at the time of the flu epidemic, included a parish in Fresno, St. Alphonsus, which was accepted in December 1908. The parish was largely an ethnic mix of Italians and Mexicans.⁴¹ In October 1918, the community there, under Father Edward Molloy, willingly followed

Fresno's daily newspaper, *The Fresno Morning Republican*, reported on October 5 that the "Spanish gripe" had come to the city, but that there was "no danger if care is taken."⁴³ This dispassionate approach helped

from people, as did most people in Fresno. This kept the deadly virus at bay and mortality was relatively low through the whole city.⁴² How did this happen?

⁴¹ See further George Rassley, "A Brief History of St. Alphonsus Parish, Fresno, California, 1908-1983," mss, in RADP, Oakland Province Collection, Fresno: St. Alphonsus.

⁴² See Ethan J. Kytly, "Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 hit Fresno hard, but social distancing proved valuable," *Fresno Bee* (April 16, 2020), available at <https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/readers->

<https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/article242040901.html>. See also Sean Hannon Clark, *The Impact of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic on Fresno, California* (MA thesis, California State University at Fresno, 1991).

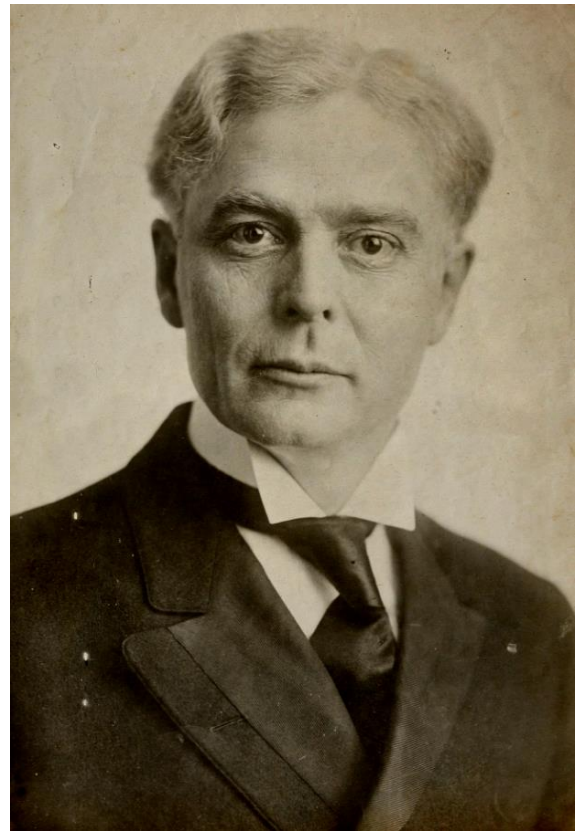
⁴³ See, eg., <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2020/03/22/dispatches-from-fresno-1918-19-following-the-spanish-flu-pandemic-in-real-time/>.

keep the spread in check, however, it was no panacea. The population's morbidity reflected other measures, such as early closures of dance halls, movie theaters, and places of worship. However, work stoppages were not entertained. Consequently, cases began to emerge in significant numbers by October 11, when 35 were registered by health authorities. By late November, the city's "flu lid" was relaxed and movie houses were re-opened. In early December, however, a second wave hit Fresno and continued through the following year, in part due to the obstinacy of bar and pool hall owners who refused to close.

In the Diocese of Monterey-Los Angeles, influenza moved in with stealth, but when it reached Los Angeles, health officials were already cognizant of the mitigation strategies enacted in other municipalities across the nation. For one, they decided not to allow Liberty Loan parades or other similar gatherings for the war effort. They also issued detailed guidelines to avoid the contagion and to help prevent its spread. For the Redemptorists in Fresno, knowledge was power. It helped them take the necessary preventative measures and avoid ill health.

The house in Seattle left little account of the flu's effects, other than to say that about 20 parishioners died and the church and school were closed from October 5 to November 17. The reason for this is not complicated: the house chronicler, Father John Matthews, was hospitalized with the flu for a month between October 11 and November 11.⁴⁴ This is what happens to the historical record when no one picks up where others leave off. The city had a mixed

record of mitigation, but civil authorities were bullish on their efficacy. The public had to toe the line or face steep fines. That meant congregating in large numbers was strictly forbidden. After closing Seattle's churches, Mayor Ole Hanson said that "religion which won't keep for two weeks is not worth having."⁴⁵



Mayor Ole Hanson of Seattle.

In Portland, Oregon, parishioners at Holy Redeemer were denied sacramental worship between October 6 and November 17. In this period, the fathers looked for ministries outside the parish.

Father Benedict Lenz became a Knights of Columbus chaplain at nearby Fort Stevens, a Civil War era installation that

⁴⁴ See Geiermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province*, 290.

⁴⁵ See Alex Knapp, "The Dr. Fauci of the 1918 Spanish Flu," *Forbes*, online at https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2020/04/28/the-dr-fauci-of-the-1918-spanish-flu/?utm_source=FBPAGE&utm_medium=social&utm_content=3305128674&utm_campaign=sprinklrForbesMainFB#60ce862e3547

[flu/?utm_source=FBPAGE&utm_medium=social&utm_content=3305128674&utm_campaign=sprinklrForbesMainFB#60ce862e3547](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2020/04/28/the-dr-fauci-of-the-1918-spanish-flu/?utm_source=FBPAGE&utm_medium=social&utm_content=3305128674&utm_campaign=sprinklrForbesMainFB#60ce862e3547)

guarded the mouth of the Columbia River. Ostensibly the priest-on-base for Sunday services, Lenz eventually contracted the flu and was confined to the base and placed under quarantine. His health was at times precarious. The fathers at Holy Redeemer sent another of their number, Father George Sunday on October 13 to take his place. Sunday eventually administered last rites to his confrere, bringing himself into proximity of contagion. When he began his service, the chronicler noted that Sunday was attending “to soldiers who are dying there in great numbers.” Lenz’s condition grew dire; he was laid up with the disease for several weeks, only returning to Holy Redeemer on December 23. In a community of five Redemptorist priests and two brothers, this sudden reduction in personnel was deeply felt. Although “Thanksgiving services were held for the happy termination of the war the following Sunday, [p]ublic prayers were held daily at Our Lady’s Shrine, beseeching her to protect the parishioners from the scourge of the Influenza.”⁴⁶

*Profile: Very Rev. John McGinn, C.Ss.R.,
Rector and Consultor*

The parents of Father John McGinn, James and Mary (O’Donoghue) McGinn, were residents in the parish of Dromore, County Tyrone, Ireland. John was baptized there, on October 1, 1875, the day after his birth. When he was still an infant, he crossed to America with his parents, settling in Philadelphia. There he attended St. Vincent de Paul Church and school, in the Germantown section of the city and future site of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. This Vincentian parish was also home to the house of formation and McGinn began to study Latin,

first in connection to his service as an altar boy, but also with a thought toward entering the seminary of the Congregation of the Mission. Soon after he began these studies, however, his parents decided to move to Montreal, Canada, and it is there that he first encountered the Redemptorists, though his vocation was still unclear.

In 1890, he left school to work in the general office of the Grand Trunk Railway Company and remained there until August 1894, when he left for college. In September 1893, he paid a visit to a Trappist community in Oka, Quebec, Canada and his priestly vocation was again awakened. He vacillated in part due to concerns that his parents could not afford to send him to the seminary. Several months later, while in conversation with a Redemptorist from Belgium, he learned of some young Canadians who were then studying in Belgium at the Redemptorist novitiate.

McGinn let him know that he was entertaining the idea of becoming a Trappist, but almost immediately the Belgian persuaded him that the austerity of that life was not for him, but that the Redemptorists could be more suitable. “This struck me like a flash, but I was forced to acknowledge that I could never think of the priesthood as my parents would find it hard enough to part with my little assistance, not to speak of educating me for so many years,” he wrote in his vocation biography. The Belgian scoffed and said if God had called him, money would be no obstacle.

To settle his mind, he made a retreat at the Trappist monastery of Oka, Notre Dame du Lac, and there discerned that it was not the life he was searching for. Before Father McGinn as a young priest, c. 1905. RADP photo, St. Louis Province Collection, Personalia, McGinn.

⁴⁶ See Giermann, *Annals of the St. Louis Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, vol. III, 1913-1922 (St. Louis: Redemptorists, 1924), 293.



novitiate in De Soto, Missouri where, on August 15, 1900, he made his religious profession. He was ordained on June 28, 1905 by Archbishop Richard Glennon. For a while, McGinn was a professor at Kirkwood and was appointed in 1909 by the Rector Major, Father Patrick Murray, as master of novices in Our Lady of Perpetual



At left, Father McGinn as a young priest and above, in the company of the students at St. Joseph's College, Kirkwood, Missouri. RADP photos, St. Louis Province Collection, Personalia, McGinn.

he left, he encountered a layman who was formerly employed at St. Joseph's in Kirkwood, MO—the Redemptorist minor seminary whose buildings were modeled on the Trappist monastery where they were. McGinn confided that he hoped to go to Belgium to study, but the gentleman wondered why he would go so far when he could easily be admitted to the Redemptorists' St. Louis Province. He offered McGinn contact information for the rector there and his application proved successful. His five years in Kirkwood were fruitful ones and he advanced to the

Help, Kansas City. This was a most unusual appointment because McGinn had not yet reached his thirtieth birthday.

In 1912, he rose to become the rector at St. Joseph's College, where he also served as a professor. In 1915 he received the first of two appointments as rector of the Rock Church in St. Louis where he also served as secretary-consultor to the Provincial, Father Christopher McEnniry.

The events of October 1918 are described by the Rock Church house chronicler in the most economical terms:

October 2: Very Rev. Father Rector and Brother Mark Knoedelseder went to DeSoto today.

October 3: Brother Mark ill. Very Rev. Father Rector ill this afternoon.

October 4: Very Rev. Father Rector taken this morning to St. Mary's Infirmary, condition serious, pneumonia.

October 5: Brother Mark was taken this morning to St. Mary's Infirmary.

October 6: Very Rev. Father Rector died this morning about 7 a.m.⁴⁷

This timeline is a stark rendition of the facts, but there is a considerable amount to unpack. First, the dates are incorrect. According to the De Soto house chronicle, Father McGinn and Brother Mark arrived at 9:49 on October 1. Secondly, the reason that both Father McGinn and Brother Mark went to De Soto on October 2 to fill in for Father Provincial Christopher McEnniry and to preside at the religious profession of one of the choir novices, Frater Brennan, a Canadian from the Edmonton Province. The



RADP photo, St. Louis Province Collection, Personalia, McGinn.

rapid nature of the flu's effects must have been violent and unrelenting, though Father McGinn's obituary noted that he had been battling a cold since mid-September. This, too, seems to contradict the DeSoto house annals, which reported that all were "thunderstruck as he had just been here and apparently in the best of health." The selection of St. Mary's Infirmary was both practical and in keeping with those in religion, insofar as it was a hospital meant for the indigent poor. It was there that he received the last sacraments and was able to make a renewal of his vows. The provincial chronicle goes on to note in its lengthy obituary that moments before his expiration, he had the consolation of his confreres around him praying the prayers for the

dying—no doubt at certain risk of their own lives. McGinn was waked in Sodality Hall on Monday and Tuesday. His mortal remains were visited by hundreds who came to pay their respects—despite the civil order prohibiting large gatherings. The funeral was set for Wednesday, October 9, but owing to the order barring public funerals, McGinn's services were removed to Kirkwood.

⁴⁷ See Redemptorist Archives of the Denver Province (hereafter RADP), Domestic Chronicles, Rock Church, St. Louis. In this book is pasted the "In Memoriam" notice from the church calendar, which also rehearses the days leading to Father McGinn's death. As it is written there, he accompanied an unnamed brother to DeSoto on October 1, a Tuesday, and returned to St. Louis on Wednesday evening.

"Thursday afternoon [October 3], he heard confessions as usual. Friday afternoon his physician ordered him to the hospital with double pneumonia. Friday evening he received all the last sacraments, rallied a little on Saturday, but early Sunday morning a change for the worse came on, and at 7:15 a.m. he breathed his last, quietly and peacefully without a struggle."

On October 9, at 9 a.m., the funeral procession set out from the Rock Church for a solemn requiem Mass at St. Joseph's Chapel in Kirkwood. The provincial celebrated the Mass and Father Louis McKeown served as Master of Ceremonies. Father Thomas P. Brown preached the eulogy. He had been, until August of 1918, the rector at Oconomowoc and would eventually join the provincial government as the first consultor. Attending the funeral were several of the province's rectors: Fathers Thomas Palmer, Frank Miller, Edward Cantwell, Augustine Guendling, William Graham, Mathias Meyer, and Christian Rudolph (subdeacon). Joining them were Fathers Joseph Beil, Nicholas Franzen, George Mahony, Henry Weber, Edward Mattingly (deacon), John Schagemann, Peter Foerster, and Joseph Firle. Additionally, all of the fathers of the St. Louis community as well as St. Joseph's College were in attendance. They were all joined by members of the diocesan clergy and, according to the provincial chronicle, "hundreds of parishioners and friends accompanied him to the grave."

McGinn was described as "a man of solid virtue and deep piety, humble as a child, conspicuous for his tender love for our Blessed Lady, tireless in his zeal for souls, a prudent and fatherly superior and rector, a most charitable confrere, an able director of the juvenate, a saintly novice master. But the virtue which perhaps ore than any other shone forth in the life of Father McGinn, was his gentle meekness and meek gentleness of character. His gentle smile and kindly ways exerted an irresistible charm that endeared him to all who knew him, and caused him to be deeply mourned when he was so suddenly called away. ... Called away in the very prime of a most promising career, he will be remembered more for

what he was than for what he did. And yet his life from the time of his ordination till his death was a most busy one, first as lector and prefect of discipline in the Juvenate, then as Novice master, then as director of the Juvenate and finally as Rector of an important parish. In all these responsible positions he labored with indefatigable zeal and with the utmost fidelity, never sparing himself and never in the least shirking his duty. Father McGinn has indeed a very strong claim to the grateful remembrance of his confreres in the St. Louis Province." Even beyond the province's internal encomium, *The Western Watchman*, the Catholic newspaper of St. Louis, spoke of him as having a "special claim to grateful remembrance" in the diocese, where he spent most of his priestly ministry.⁴⁸ He was survived by his mother—by then a St. Louis resident—a married brother and a sister, who pursued a vocation as a Grey Nun in Canada.

Profile: Father Francis Lepsa, Missionary to Bohemians

In mid-October, the DeSoto house chronicles reported that "all Sunday work, coming 40 hrs., missions stopped for indefinite period because of prevalence of Spanish 'Flu.'" The missionary life of Father Francis Lepsa was therefore on hold. It did not sit well with him, for on November 1, together with the provincial, he left De Soto with the intention of resuming his course of missions—eight days ahead of when the churches of De Soto had their restrictions lifted. When the Sunday Masses resumed in St. Louis on November 17, large crowds returned to the pews. People throughout the state seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. But that did not mean that the flu had finished its terrible work. Eight days

⁴⁸ See the news clipping in McGinn's personnel file in RADP, St. Louis Deceased Confreres, McGinn.

after the parishes resumed their normal functions, another Redemptorist priest died. A telegram arrived in DeSoto at 1 p.m. telling of the death of Father Lepsa, who succumbed while giving a Bohemian mission in Pocahontas, Iowa. Attached to the De Soto house, Lepsa was almost always engaged for Bohemian or Slovak missions and had a reputation as one of the best linguists in the entire province. When news reached the confreres and novices, it “affected all deeply.” A few hours later, the rector, Father Francis Miller, was on a train to Pocahontas to collect the body of his confrere but he only got as far as St. Louis, where arrangements were then made to send it there and then on to Kirkwood, where the obsequies would take place.

A detailed letter of the circumstances of Father Lepsa’s death came from the pastor at Pocahontas, Father H. B. Kramer. Lepsa arrived in Iowa on Saturday, November 16 and seemed fit except for a slight cough. On Sunday, November 17th, Lepsa began his mission in the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Pocahontas, which he continued through Wednesday evening. The first day had uncooperative weather and a sparse attendance. On Monday evening he “preached very long and the most forceful and impressive sermon that was ever heard here; he perspired extremely before he was through, and then did not change his clothing but sat up in the library where it was warm and comfortable for more than an hour.”⁴⁹ He gave the full mission program, including the children’s mission.

RADP photo, St. Louis Province Collection, Personalia, Lepsa.



⁴⁹ See Rev. H. B. Kramer to Redemptorist Fathers of St. Clement’s College, DeSoto, Missouri, December 6, 1918, in RADP, Personalia: Lepsa, Francis X. According to Father Kramer, Lepsa occupied his time

in the library reading an article by Sir Geoffrey Raupert on Spiritism penned for the Ecclesiastical Review, together with a book on the subject by the same author.

On Wednesday, the 20th, he noticed that he had developed a powerful cold, but ignored it, and on Thursday morning, preached after the second Mass. By then a high fever struck and the local pastor called a physician, who ordered the Redemptorist to bed rest. Unfortunately for Father Kramer, he also came down with a case of the flu. While on Friday and Saturday there seemed to be an improvement in Father Lepsa's status, on Sunday the housekeeper noticed his breathing was more labored, what some called "musty straw," for the sound his lungs made. He had developed pneumonia. When he learned of his condition from a local physician, Lepsa calmly requested a visit from Father Kramer in order to make his last confession, which he was unable to complete owing to a sudden onset of delirium. His illness was so aggressive that he expired ten minutes later. Father Kramer wrote to the DeSoto community a touching remembrance:

Having heard Fr. Lepsa's sermons during the four days of the mission, I can realize how enormous must be his loss to your Congregation and to the Bohemian people of this country. I have never heard a missionary that so deeply impressed the people. And with all that he was so humble and unassuming in his ways. He forgot himself altogether in his zeal to bring souls to God. In my opinion he simply worked himself to death. On Wednesday, although suffering from a bad cold, he preached six hours and heard confessions the rest of the time. It seems to be Fr. Lepsa gave his life for my parish.⁵⁰

The funeral liturgy was celebrated by Fr. John H. Mueller was celebrant, assisted by Father Palmer, deacon and Fr. Kvasnica,

subdeacon. Others there: Mattingly, Maerke, Higgins, Joseph Fegen, Kennedy, Weber, Brown, Ahlert, Schagemann, and Aschoff. In his homily at Father Lepsa's funeral, Father Nicholas Franzen praised Lepsa for his zeal and earnestness, as well as his humility and religious spirit. "He said in his ten yrs. of missionary labors he had given some 300 missions. He was a tireless worker and even in his last illness he chafed at the restraint placed on him by the doctor." So quickly did the flu advance that a letter Lepsa sent from Pocahontas advising the DeSoto rector of his illness arrived the day after the telegram announcing his death.

Francis Lepsa was born in the little hamlet of Tamrac, near LaCrosse, Wisconsin, on November 9, 1881, to Frank and Anna (Jirgal)—both of whom came from Bohemia. Their son attended St. Wenceslaus parochial school in LaCrosse. In 1895, through the largesse of the family's pastor, Francis attended St. Benedict's College in Atchison, Kansas, with a view toward studying for the priesthood. He had received the Benedictine habit on March 21, 1899 but was discouraged from joining owing to his lack of proficiency in English. Meanwhile, he had read Father Joh Berger's *Life of Bishop Neumann* and became drawn to the Redemptorists. In September of that year, he joined the Redemptorists. He was taken into the novitiate at Kansas City and pronounced his vows on September 29, 1901. He studied philosophy and theology at St. Clement's College, De Soto, Missouri, before his ordination to the priesthood at the Rock Church, St. Louis, on July 4, 1906. Almost from the beginning of his ministry, he devoted himself exclusively to the work of Bohemian missions—and preached over 300 of them around the United States. At the time of his death, there was on his desk a stack of a dozen fresh applications for

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Bohemian missions. His work on their behalf was crowned by his translation of the Redemptorist Mission Book into Bohemian. He was buried from the St. Joseph's College Chapel in Kirkwood, Missouri, and was laid to rest in the Redemptorists' cemetery. He was survived by his mother, two sisters, and five brothers.

Both Fathers McGinn and Lepsa were heralded as members of the St. Louis Province whose lives were lost to the flu. But they were not the only members of the Redemptorist family to take ill and perish. The provincial chronicle for 1918 also makes a careful notation that during the year the Province lost "one professed student and two lay brothers by death." It goes on to supply a long obituary on the life of Frater Arthur Froelich, who died in the studentate at Oconomowoc on December 29, 1918. At the time of his death he was in the first year of the Dogma course. The chronicle states that "he died a victim to his charity for the sick, for he contracted the Influenza while waiting upon his confreres who had been stricken down with that dread disease."⁵¹ His death was edifying. The chronicler noted how, on the day of his passing, he mustered all his remaining strength to sit up in bed, and thanking the infirmarian for his kindness and the kindnesses of others, he slumped back into a resting posture and quietly gave up his soul. He was buried on New Years Day in the newly formed cemetery of the studentate, where he occupied the first grave in that plot. He would not be alone for long. The novice who made his vows in the presence of Father McGinn in DeSoto, moved shortly thereafter to Oconomowoc to pursue his

⁵¹ Froelich was born September 1, 1896 in St. Louis, Missouri.

⁵² The description of the Covid Cross is borrowed from Ernest Simmons, "The Covid Cross," *Dialog* (March 2020), available online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/dial.12559>. Simmons writes: "It is theodicy at its most

theological studies. That Canadian Frater, Patrick Brennan, developed pneumonia secondary to the flu on December 27 and died the following day.

*The COVID-19 Crisis and the Flu of 1918*⁵²

We are living through a global pandemic. As I write this (May 13), well over a quarter million people have died from corona virus (COVID-19), including 83,000 Americans. The expectation is that this figure will continue to grow, particularly in the developing world. It has altered daily life in the West and disrupted family relations, educational institutions, and whole economies. If we are to learn any lessons from the influenza outbreak of 1918, it is that there is a remarkable unity in the face of strife. Humanity fell victim even while each individual played by the same rules—or at least attempted not to give the flu's advance any additional edge. For Redemptorists that meant sacrifice of ministry. While they carried on internally in the daily sacrifice of the Mass, they did so without the people present. Their missions were all halted or curtailed. Only one sacrament was still available: the anointing of the sick. Even then, the trepidation caused by contact with an infected person was but a trifle in the face of the courage required to give succor to those in dire straits.

What is striking about all the data supplied in the Redemptorist house chronicles is a near abiding respect for local health authorities and their influence on local churches. Pastors, however reluctantly, followed orders, even though there were some exceptions. In some dioceses, like

brutal, and it must be challenged. *A free creation and human greed combine to make an international disaster, not divine intervention.* It is here that the cross confronts the COVID-19 virus, not with platitudes or panaceas, with naming and blaming, but with the affirmation that God is with us."

Philadelphia, health authorities issued their directives in concert with Archbishop Dougherty and his pledge of support carried considerable weight.⁵³ Every single parish, including the two Redemptorist parishes, gave no resistance and complied. This was not the case in the Diocese of Albany, where the men of St. Clement's somewhat casually observed the stay-at-home orders.

The Covid cross of 2020 is in many ways unlike the experience of the flu. Where President Woodrow Wilson never said anything in public about the pandemic, instead choosing to focus nearly all of his time and energy on the resolution of the Great War, the current administration of President Donald Trump has been very overt in its pronouncements, both in the press

briefing room of the White House, various select news outlets, and on social media. Comparisons, however, are limited to things like social distancing, the wearing of masks, and personal hygiene. In almost every major city in the United States, local newspapers make near-cookie-cutter adaptations of a familiar article that compares the current virus with the flu's deadly virus. But we can also say that, like Simon the Cyrene, there are numerous helpers to carry this cross. We think of health care workers, the delivery people, the funeral directors. Their own heroism in the face of contagion does more than give the appearance of normalcy, as important as that is. They show how virtue and good are still present even in the midst of catastrophe.



⁵³ Early in the battle with the flu, city health officials knew that to enforce their plans they had to enlist Philadelphia's clergy. On October 5, a dire headline in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* announced that there were 171 deaths and 788 influenza cases in the city but that "clergy cooperating" somehow shored up the actions of Wilmer Krusen, the director of the city's Board of Health. Eventually, when it came time to close houses of worship, Krusen had credibility with local churchmen of all stripes. As the outbreak

waned, it was the clergy who set the day and hour of their re-opening, albeit on the advice of the Board. Catholic schools delayed their re-opening by a week, in part to give so many teaching sisters a chance to recuperate from their labors in the hospital wards during the epidemic, but also to mourn the sixteen nuns who lost their lives in doing so. See "171 Deaths, 788 Influenza Cases," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (October 5, 1918); and "Isolate Influenza Cases in Future," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 4, 1918).