

## Learning from History

By Eva Stefanski, Archivist

Often in times of great trial, we look back at history and wonder about the challenges others have faced before us. Archivists for congregations of women religious across the country have been receiving requests for information on how the sisters prevailed during the 1918 flu pandemic, the largest and deadliest pandemic in recorded history.

Are there things that history can teach us? What comfort can come from the stories of those in the community that have tread this path before? When I looked in the Archives for any information on the 1918 pandemic, what I discovered was surprising. The School Sisters of St. Francis have survived this ordeal not just once, but *many times before*.

We have a single testimony from the European Province of a surviving sister of the 1918 pandemic who was living in Strasbourg at the time. She remembered October 24, 1918, when, "The morning was very solemn and beautiful, but toward evening some of the newly received sisters felt sick and had to retire. The next day the number of sick sisters increased, so that by the feast of All Saints, the whole choir group and many other sisters were in bed."

This account goes on to detail the frequent deaths that began on November 4 and continued for the next four weeks. It talks of things many will find familiar now: trips that had to be canceled or postponed, and funerals with no mourners in attendance. It also mentions the sisters who were healthy enough to be caregivers working all day without rest. One sister in particular was called for help just as she was retiring at 11:30 p.m. The sister responded to the call, and "her next day's work just began without any chance of resting, and all tiredness disappeared."

Many people forget that this pandemic arrived on the heels of the devastation of World War I. "What made matters so much worse for the sisters was the fact that the entire Motherhouse was still arranged as a hospital for soldiers, and during the whole epidemic about 50 to 60 soldiers were still there."

There was no "lockdown" or "safer-at-home" then, and the sisters had to move because France was occupying the region of Alsace, and Strasbourg was cut off from Germany.

"On December 7 the first sisters, 10 at a time, crossed the Rhine, each one carrying a short note which read "No return" and a small bundle of clothing. Each person was allowed to take 40 pounds, and everything they carried was searched by the French soldiers." The Sisters lost 25 members of their community in the second and most virulent wave of the 1918 pandemic, but they gained a forever home in Erlenbad.

And what of the United States? Unfortunately, we have little record of the sisters' experience of the 1918 pandemic in this country. What we do have, however, are firsthand accounts of a different crisis: the 1932 flu epidemic in the Motherhouse in Milwaukee.

On January 11, 1932, the daybook notes, "The flu is on the increase in the house and the temperatures of the patients are running quite high." Even then, as with today, the sisters reflected on the history of 1918, writing on February 21, "There are many cases of the flu in the house; in fact, it is a question as to where to place the patients. Just as soon as two or three leave the infirmary, others are brought in. It seems like the epidemic of 1918 with the exception that the attacks are not as serious."

That same day, 50 cases of flu are noted in the daybook. As the entries go on, they detail the day-to-day management of the epidemic, from treatments ("Dr. Wyman has asked that all patients at the convent suffering from the flu be given brandy three times a day") to preventative measures ("Those recuperating are in one group; those running a slight temperature in another; and those with high temperature in a third. The meals are being served in a real cafeteria fashion.") Among the scheduling changes: "Owing to the great amount of illness, the usual classroom programs in honor of St. Thomas, that patron of Catholic schools, were not held."

The 1932 epidemic lasted months; in February alone there were 70-100 cases of the flu. Another flu arrived in 1944, when a March 7 daybook entry notes that 37 sisters rested at the sanitarium with the flu.

Living in a historic moment as we are today, the conversation of our experience is often around how unique our situation is and how we must adapt to new circumstances. The true lesson of history, however, is not how to survive a present crisis, but that we have already survived similar crises before. Today, we can take comfort in the resilience of this community and the message of history: Whatever challenges arise, the sisters will overcome.

If you have questions or would like more information about the School Sisters of St. Francis and our history, please contact our School Sisters of St. Francis Archives, 1545 S. Layton Blvd., Milwaukee, WI 53215; or email [archives@sssf.org](mailto:archives@sssf.org).