

EPISODE ONE: The Martyrs of Memphis

*"It is strange that so much dying
should prove to us that the world is worth living in."*



Illustration by Tungwai Chau

Those words, written in an editorial in the *New York Tribune* on September 25, 1878, referred to the yellow fever epidemic that struck the American South in the summer of that year. Memphis was especially hard hit: of its 50,000 residents, more than half fled, leaving 20,000 to face the disease alone, which eventually claimed more than 5,000 lives.

Among those who stayed were the two priests and four nuns of St. Mary's Episcopal Church (now cathedral), who joined dozens of other Christians in ministering to the sick, burying the dead, and caring for the resulting orphans.

Their motivation was quite clear: it came directly from their sense of faithfulness to Jesus. When Constance, who was head of the work of the Sisters of St. Mary, wrote to her Mother Superior in New York asking for additional sisters to come help, she observed that she would "guard them to the utmost, but you and I know they are offering their lives." One of the sisters who responded to the call was Ruth, who wrote to a friend, "you know how gladly and unreservedly I give myself to our dear Lord. Pray for me, that in life, in death, I may be ever His own." As Constance foretold, she and all her companions eventually succumbed to the fever, and were buried along with countless other victims in the city's Elmwood cemetery.

The editorial published in the *Tribune* a short time later reflected upon how the sisters' selfless service stood as a refutation of the cynicism of the age. The editorialist wrote:

We say sometimes in cynical wrath that all truth and justice have departed out of this world. But those poor Sisters lying dead in Memphis are an all-sufficient refutation of our pessimistic generalities. This generous giving ought to silence, for a time at least, the snarls of the misanthropists. It is strange that so much dying should prove to us that the world is worth living in.

Perhaps it is in these words that we will find a reflection applicable to our own day. We too live in a cynical age, when the mantras of greed, selfishness, and resentment of the other are purveyed even by some of our leaders as though they are the values of a human life authentically lived. But we Christians know better: we know that in the example of people like Constance and her companions, we are given an alternative vision of what truly humane values are, through their complete commitment to follow the example of Jesus' own compassion and self-offering.

In our current global pandemic, there are many, many people who are similarly offering themselves with an equal selflessness as that of the Memphis martyrs. They are the witnesses given to our generation, that true greatness comes not from aggrandizing one's own self, but in selfless service to others.

As the prayer reads that is offered on September 9 (the day of the church's commemoration of the Martyrs of Memphis):



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