The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul

“The Company, founded in France in the seventeenth century by Saint Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac is known in the Church by the name of Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Servants of the Poor.

Its beginnings were at the same time simple and unexpected… Attentive to following Divine Providence and responsive to the workings of the Spirit, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) became conscious of the material and spiritual misery of his time, and devoted his life to the service and evangelization of poor persons, whom he called ‘our Lords and Masters’. To carry out this work, he founded the Confraternities of Charity (1617) and the Congregation of the Mission (1625). Providentially, he met Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), who collaborated closely with him in his charitable works.” Together they founded the Daughters of Charity (1633).

“And that Sisters, was the beginning of your Company. As it was not then what it is now, there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as He wants.” (St. Vincent, Feb. 13, 1646)

“The call heard by the first Sisters is ever the same. Throughout the world it continues to raise up and assemble Daughters of Charity, who strive to rediscover at the source the inspiration and intuitions of their Founders so that they may respond with ever-renewed fidelity and availability to the needs of their time.”

St. Vincent de Paul    Daughters of Charity    St. Louise de Marillac
The Daughters of Charity in Philadelphia
A brief history

1814 — In 1797 a group of Catholic laymen founded a child care institution after an outbreak of yellow fever that left many children orphaned. In 1809, Fr. Hurley, pastor of St. Augustine’s Church appealed to Father Seton to send sisters to take over the care of these orphans. In 1814, Mother Rose White and two companions, arrived on September 29, 1814 to begin their work at St. Joseph Asylum. The building at 6th and Spruce was the first site, but over the years there were many changes and moves occurred. Ultimately the institution was moved to Church Lane in 1882 and remained there until it closed in 1984.

1829 — Early conditions were very difficult. Mother Rose wrote to Mother Seton, “The Institution is in Debt, the children’s clothing is in deplorable condition, we have only half enough beds. Both boys and girls are in the institution which is a subject of regret to us but assurance has been given that as soon a possible the intention is to form separate establishments.” A charter for this new home, exclusively for boys, was not obtained until 1829. This institution later became known as St. John’s Orphan Asylum. The orphanage moved several times in the following years due to the great increase in the number of orphans because of the cholera epidemic. The Sisters of Charity withdrew in 1847 and the Sisters of St. Joseph took charge of the asylum until 1970 when St. John’s closed.

1832 — Asiatic Cholera — the Sisters were asked to nurse the sick at the Almshouse.

1833 — St. Mary’s Free School was opened. A pay school was added in later years. According to Metropolitan Catholic Almanac, 200 girls were enrolled in the day school. Classes were held weekly for boarding school girls. In 1861 two Sisters died of smallpox; one from Christmas Eve and the other on Christmas Day. In 1862, all the Sisters were drafted for service in the Military Hospitals. They did not return to the schools.

1855 — A small group of laymen started St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum in 1850. In 1855 Bishop John Neumann requested Daughters of Charity to take over the work. Three Sisters were sent from Emmitsburg. The Orphan Asylum was moved to 18th and Wood Streets on the site later occupied by Cathedral Parochial School and Hallahan Catholic High School. Many other moves and changes took place and in 1958 St. Vincent’s Home merged with Gonzaga Home in Germantown.

1858 — A first Class Charter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania under the title of St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum was obtained. In addition to the stated purpose of caring for orphans the future plan for a “lying-in” (maternity) facility was included. In 1889 the name was changed to St. Vincent’s Home and Hospital. St. Vincent’s closed the hospital unit in 1956. In 1957, the Daughters of Charity withdrew and the Nardines took over the Infant home. The hospital was rebuilt for the Medical Missionaries.

1859 — St. Joseph’s Hospital was founded by Rev. Joseph F. Berbelin, S.J. and a board of managers. This was the first Catholic Hospital in Philadelphia. In 1829 the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, replaced the Sisters of St. Joseph; they leased the hospital from the diocese for 88 years. In 1890 St. Joseph’s Hospital, Girard Ave & 16-17th St had 2912 patients per year. 431 poor Patients. 175 beds. 20 Sisters of Charity. In 1947 the Daughters of Charity withdrew and the Glennridge Franciscans assumed charge of the hospital until 1954 when the Felician Sisters of Lodi, NJ, took over. In 1967 the LaSalle College Cooperative Program was initiated and in 1982 a new $20 million hospital opened.

1862 — Sr. Gonzaga with 40 Sisters took charge of Satterlee Military Hospital while still retaining supervision of St. Joseph’s Orphan Asylum. Satterlee Military Hospital was the largest hospital caring for Civil War wounded—both Union and Confederate.

A group of Sisters sailed on the U.S.S. Whhilldin to Yorktown, VA, and brought back 175 sick and wounded soldiers from Fortress Monroe. They cared for the soldiers under the supervision of Surgeon-General Henry H. Smith.

1897 — Gonzaga Memorial Asylum was erected in Germantown to accommodate 150 children. From 1914—1918 Gonzaga operated a day nursery so that Mothers could work in factories to help the war effort. In 1944 St. Joseph’s Asylum and Gonzaga Home merged (new name St. Joseph’s Gonzaga Home.) 1958 St. Vincent’s, Drexel Hill merged with St. Joseph’s-Gonzaga. In 1968 a new building was erected and the sisters and children moved into the new building, then called St. Joseph’s Hall of for Girls. In 1984 St. Joseph Hall for Girls closed. Most children were being placed in foster homes, children admitted to the institution usually had severe emotional or psychological problems and needed a plan of treatment much more expensive than that of average children. The Philadelphia Catholic Charities established several group homes for girls in this area.

1984 to the present (2014)—The Daughters of Charity presently have one house in Philadelphia. This is located in the Germantown area. The sisters are involved in multiple ministries in the service of those who are poor. Among which are :DePaul Catholic elementary school, DePaul Youth Center, Catholic Social Services, Trenton, Dawn’s Place, DePaul House, and St. Vincent’s Seminary.

“The Charity of Christ impels us.”