

## **The Franciscan Sisters of Mary: Beginnings in the St. Louis Archdiocese**

On November 16, 1872, Mother Mary Odilia Berger and her five companions landed on the St. Louis riverfront with a mission—a mission that remains the mission of the congregation today: “to be the presence of the loving, serving, compassionate, healing Jesus.” They cared for the sick in their homes, those who would never be able to afford medical care. They cared for victims of smallpox (they were nicknamed the Smallpox Sisters), diphtheria, cholera, yellow fever, tuberculosis. Neighbors called them the Sisters of St. Mary (SSM) because they saw the Sisters coming and going from their convent adjacent to St. Mary of Victories Church downtown.

In five years (1877) the Sisters opened their first hospital, St. Mary’s Infirmary on Papin Street. Over the years they established more and more hospitals, eventually building the system known as SSM Health, which currently operates and manages hospitals, nursing homes, home health care and hospice facilities, pharmacies, and physician offices in Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma. The Sisters of St. Francis of Maryville, Missouri, begun by seven sisters who left the SSM congregation in 1894 to begin their own community in rural Missouri and who carried on a parallel health care ministry in the Midwest, reunited with the Sisters of St. Mary in 1987 as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary.

The Sisters have had a strong history in the St. Louis Archdiocese, providing in 1933 a nursing school for African Americans and a hospital where African Americans could receive care and African American doctors could practice, long before desegregation. They collaborated with the Jesuits to establish an outstanding nursing school at Saint Louis University and in 1956 opened Cardinal Glennon Children’s Medical Center, a world-class hospital specializing in the care of children. Through their nearly 150 years as a congregation, they have faithfully followed the encouragement of their foundress Mother Odilia: “Continue courageously for the love of God!”

(April 2021)