



Jesus, Consoler of the Afflicted

THE CARE OF THE SICK DURING THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The thirteenth century, proclaimed by many, the greatest of centuries, not only engaged in the uplifting of the higher sciences, and the solving of the problems of higher and scientific education; but it also strove to improve the social conditions of humanity by an organized care of the sick and afflicted. This movement was carried on by two general agencies, namely—Guilds and Hospitals. Guilds were voluntary associations for religious, social and commercial purposes. The guilds were of two kinds—Merchant and Craft. The Merchant Guilds became identical with the municipality and provided abundantly for the care of the sick and impoverished. The Craft Guilds provided lavishly, old age and sick pensions, through wealthy aristocrats who took sick persons into their homes and through physicians and nurses who gave their services free of charge. The hospitals, of course, were the principal institutions in which the care of the sick was carried out on a large scale.

All honor to the Catholic Church, our light, our guide, our mother, who, throughout the history of the world has saved suffering humanity from the deluge of corruption; who has known how to mould and cement together in a fitting manner, the gross elements placed under her guidance. All honor, and glory and praise to her, and to her Princes of the thirteenth century, the Popes who founded a hospital system which has endured to our own day. It will be more or less of a surprise to the generality of people to hear that this great universe of ours owes such a debt of gratitude to one of the Pontiffs of the Church—Pope Innocent III. It was he whose fatherly vigilance, keen foresight, and simple charity saw the need of such an institution. He who desired to raise the Papacy to a great political power in Europe, was the executor and founder of a plan more far-reaching to social good than any other movement of the Middle Ages.

The word "hospital" is derived from the Latin word—*hospes*—meaning a guest; hence, *hospitalis*—hospitable; and *hospitium*—a guest house. Originally, hospital signified a place where strangers and visitors having no other accommodation, remained. In the course of time such places were restricted to the care of the sick. We may define it as an institution whose scope em-

braced the care of the sick or wounded, of those afflicted with various acute diseases, and especially the care of the poor and deserted sick. In the thirteenth century as now, the typical hospital represented a natural human solicitude for suffering, inspired by Christian charity and made efficient by medical skill conducted by many faithful Sisters and nurses.

During the thirteenth century, the Crusaders began to migrate to the towns which of course, in a very short time became thickly populated. In the country where people were scattered, sickness and disease were not notably prevalent, but when they took up their residences in the towns, and the people came in closer contact, the inevitable result was the more rapid spread of sickness and disease. Pope Innocent III the reigning Pontiff, saw that something had to be done and that as quickly as possible. His flock was suffering needlessly. His remedy by which the sick were to be cared for in an easier and more skillful manner was the hospital. As Rome was the center of all Catholic activities, it was fitting that the Capital of Christianity contain the model hospital of the world. Pope Innocent immediately set about its foundation.

After giving the movement due consideration and having been enlightened as to its proper guidance, he summoned a certain Guido or Guy as he was called, from Montpellier, a university city in southern France, and founded for him the hospital of the Holy Spirit in the Borgo, situated near the Vatican, where it can be seen to this day. This was the mother hospital of the present hospital system throughout the world. Foreign Bishops and influential visitors to Rome saw and admired the wonderful work, and on returning to their respective dioceses, immediately planned similar institutions for the care of their sick and wounded, the neglected and forlorn, and rendered to them succor, which to this day has been a chief characteristic of Catholic life. This humanitarian movement flourished probably until about the sixteenth century when many hospitals in England were confiscated and turned into prisons.

It is difficult to say how many institutions of this kind were erected in Europe. Without doubt the number is very large. In Germany, as Virchow in his *History of the Foundation of the German Hospitals* tells us: "In over one hundred towns of over 5000 inhabitants each, there were erected hospitals of the Holy Spirit modeled after the Mother Hospital at Rome." We can

safely say then, that every large town contained at least one institution for the care of the sick.

With regards to other countries it is still more difficult to mention the number of places where hospitals on the model of that at Rome were established. France and Italy, Christian countries, in such close contact with the Holy See, must have promoted the movement to a large extent, but little is known of it. In England this movement for the welfare of mankind was started and continued on as large a scale as that of Germany. Records referring to those of London mention St. Bartholomew's Hospital, originally a Priory, founded in the twelfth century, but at the beginning of the thirteenth remodeled to care for the sick. Others of note were those of St. Thomas, Bethlehem, Bridwell and Christ's Hospital. These five are called the Royal Hospitals of London. Bethlehem or Bedlam became a hospital for the insane, although during the the thirteenth century there was not such a great number who were mentally afflicted.

Virchow, in the above mentioned work estimates with lavish praise the influence exerted by the Vicars of Christ at that time. "The main cause," he says, "decisive in influencing and arousing interest of the people of the time in the hospitals of the Holy Ghost, was the papal enthusiasm in the matter. The hospitals of the Holy Ghost were one of the many means by which Innocent III thought to bind humanity to the Holy See. It had its effect, for was it not calculated to show how the mighty Pope who humbled emperors, and espoused kings, who was the unrelenting adversary of the Albigenses, turned his eyes sympathetically upon the poor and sick, sought the helpless and the neglected on the streets and saved the illegitimate children from death in the waters.

"There is something conciliating and fascinating in the fact that at the very same time at which the Fourth Crusade was inaugurated through Innocent III's influence, the thought of founding a great organization of an essentially humane character to extend throughout all Christendom, was also taking form in his mind; and that in the year 1204 in which the new Latin Empire was founded in Constantinople, the newly erected hospital of the Santo Spirito was blessed and dedicated as the future center of the universal humanitarian organization."

It may be well to give a few details of this model hospital. It can easily be seen that the Hospital of the Holy Ghost was not

only a spacious building but it was carefully planned. The architecture was done by skillful men who knew their business thoroughly; and who looked into the smallest details before the building was erected. The main ward was something over four hundred feet in length, and forty in width, spacious indeed, compared with hospitals of the present day. An abundant supply of light and fresh air was afforded by numerous windows which could be opened or closed from the bottom only, the upper parts being fastened. Balconies were built so that patients could exercise by walking to and fro. Another reason for these balconies probably was that during inclement weather they would not be obliged to go out doors. In the center of this ward a cupola was added, supported by richly ornamented pillars. But the grandeur was not left to these columns alone. The walls were frescoed, beautiful paintings adorned the place, work which was done by the best of artists; and armorial pendants neatly decorated the walls.

This hospital contained one thousand beds. Many hospitals, however, cared for but small numbers, varying from seven to twenty-five persons. If larger institutions were to be erected, architects were procured and the buildings were constructed on a much larger scale. Hospitals were generally built on the banks of rivers and indeed in one hospital a river flowed directly under the institution. In others, streams flowed through the large dormitories.

Now the main object of hospital institutions was to give relief. All classes were to be received in the spirit of Christ's statement, "I was a stranger and you took Me in." As far as can be ascertained, the best that could be afforded was given to the patients. This consisted in the main of nursing, food, rest and religious instruction. No limit was placed on the food, which was the best that could be procured. Fresh meats were served three times a week, and to those unable to digest meat, jelly was given. The very weakest were served with the most delicate of dishes. In some institutions patients were never left without an attendant. Rebukes or scoldings were at no time permitted to be given. If a patient grumbled about food, the attendant in charge was to correct sweetly or bear the grumbling patiently. "Dogs and fools and female scolds were to be kept away from the patients lest they be worried or bored." The beds were of a certain length and breadth. The coverings were to be changed

frequently, and exact cleanliness was demanded. Beds for children were kept of different sizes. If mothers of newly born infants died, the babes were cared for up to an age varying from seven to ten. At some hospitals, however, foundlings were not received; the statutes of the Hotel le Comte, at Troyes, declared that their maintenance was a function of the parish churches.

Religious instruction and consolation was given the patients in abundance. On seeking admission to the hospitals, patients went to confession and received Holy Communion in order that spiritual relief to the soul might also give peace of mind to their bodies. Chapels occupied the large dormitories, and the altars were elevated so that the sick could follow the celebration of Mass in comfort. Visitations were made daily by the priest, and those wishing to communicate could do so. A custom prevalent today, was carried out in medieval times, namely, priests in vestments assisted by two attendants with lighted candles went from room to room daily to render religious consolation.

Day nurses were to be in goodly number, and special care was rendered at night. Patients were well protected from the cold, and were supplied with heavy clothing and footwear if they had occasion to rise. Practically everything we have today in our modern hospitals can be noted in those of the medieval period. But above all things, most striking was the atmosphere of peace and divine charity reigning supreme as the eagle on the summit of a mountain. There the kind and gentle nuns and nurses silently labored, with no compensation from men. Theirs was a heavenly work. Toiling in the vineyard of the Lord ever calm, smiling and cheerful. Passing from bed to bed whispering loving words of consolation and hope to the sick and dying, feeding a helpless inmate, now ministering to a powerful man stricken in the prime of life. And today as then, they continue this toilsome labor, except that their numbers have greatly increased.

Treatment was given free, and we wonder at this period, how these faithful religious managed to meet expenses. Generally, such institutions were financed from the assistance they received from outsiders. In many instances, priests were obliged by their bishops to contribute liberally to the upkeep and support of these heavenly messengers. The laity also rendered much assistance by supplying beds, heating material and lighting instruments, and also food for the table. Each hospital had its

own endowment such as lands, farms, vineyards and forests. The revenues received from the sale of produce from these places, often were taxed and with this supply thy managed to progress.

Another form of hospital is found among the institutions for the care of the sick during the thirteenth century. This was the lazar house. The lazar house did not differ from the hospital proper, except that lepers were carefully segregated from the other buildings, on account of the nature of their disease. No cure was attempted. As a rule, leper houses were on the outskirts of the towns, isolated as far as possible from all habitation. This malignant disease was considered a chastisement from God. Many of the lepers themselves formed a part of the religious communities, attending diligently to the offices of brothers and nuns. They remained in these houses until the hand of death should take them before their Lord and Creator. The feeble-minded also had a special house. These were not strictly speaking, called hospitals. Insanity was very rare in the Middle Ages, far more so than it is today.

We have seen hospital life of the thirteenth century, only in a few details. It is worthy of further study and admiration. Many conveniences we see today in our modern hospital, had their place in the hospitals of the thirteenth century. Due praise must be given to the Catholic Church, the Religious Orders, and especially to that grand and eloquent Prince of the Church—Pope Innocent III. Nor must we slight the nurses of that period who fulfilled their duties in a manner worthy of the Catholic ideal. They possessed the qualities which should be found in a successful nurse. Their hearts and their minds were with their work, and the half holiday was unheard of. Theirs was a profession, noble, yes, one of the noblest vocations a person might aspire to. In a word, they took the place of mothers to their patients.

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