DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

Women, Religious Mission, and Hospital Care in Los Angeles, 1856–1927

An Instructor’s Guide

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Instructor Guide


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**Applicable Courses:** U.S. Women and Gender History; U.S. History (late 19th/early 20th centuries); California History; Los Angeles History; History of U.S. West; Nursing or Hospital History; History of Religion in U.S.; Catholic History; Daughters of Charity History; Women and Religion; etc.

**This guide includes:**
1. Chapter Summaries, Identifications, and Discussion Questions
2. Essay Questions
3. Suggested Readings and Resources

**Significance of the Daughters of Charity in Los Angeles:**

1. **Women’s Roles:** The Daughters of Charity illustrate the emergence of opportunities for unmarried women to engage in public activities outside the nuclear family in the nineteenth century. Motivated by a desire to serve God through serving poor persons, these Catholic sisters established and maintained charitable institutions. The first women to incorporate a business in Los Angeles, the Daughters also bought and sold property, negotiated contracts with government officials and railroad companies, cultivated benefactor relationships with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and developed innovative financial strategies to maintain their hospital’s vitality without compromising its religious mission. The Daughters of Charity developed the leadership, business, and interpersonal skills necessary to negotiate the economic, social and political challenges of an urbanizing western environment.

2. **Social Welfare:** Partnering with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1858, the Daughters of Charity opened the first hospital in Los Angeles. By caring for the county’s charity patients, the sisters facilitated the town’s transition to governmental forms of welfare relief. However, the Daughters’ emphasis on human dignity and respect for the individual tempered the class, race, and religious biases that often led to corruption and neglect in almshouses and charity hospitals elsewhere in the United States.

3. **Race:** The Daughters extended assistance to those in need regardless of race or creed. They not only admitted people of color into their hospital as patients, but also accepted Mexican and *Californiana* women into the sisterhood, some of whom served on their corporate board in the 1870s.
4. **Nursing:** Through their mentorship programs, the Daughters of Charity trained skilled nurses before the field was professionalized. The sisters’ training emphasized compassion, respect, and human dignity, and nurses remained attentive to the physical and spiritual needs of their patients—caring for body and soul. Although not the first to open formal nurses’ training schools in the United States, the Daughters quickly adapted to changes in the hospital industry, instituting sisters-only diploma programs and founding nursing schools for laywomen in the 1890s.

5. **Leadership:** By the early twentieth century, the Daughters of Charity maintained a competitive leadership position within the city’s burgeoning health care industry, challenging stereotypes that portrayed Catholic sisters as “backwards” or “un-modern.” They did so without compromising their religious mission to serve those in poverty. These women remained attentive to the changing needs of doctors, nurses, and patients in the city. They built state-of-the-art facilities in 1884, 1902, and 1927, incorporated new technology, and expanded the nursing staff by opening a training school for laywomen in 1899. They extended admitting privileges to all reputable physicians, and contracted with the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Marine Health Service to care for sick and injured railroad workers and sailors. Throughout, the sisters continued to provide a significant amount of care for the poor; 21% of patients received financial assistance in 1925.

**Outline of the Book and Discussion Questions:**

**Introduction:**

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the book’s overall argument? (17-18, 28)
2. How does the author justify the significance of her research topic? Is it convincing? Why or why not?
3. What types of sources does the author use? Why is it important to use sources in multiple languages? (24-25; further discussion of sources, research challenges and methods is available in the bibliographic essay, 227-234)

**Chapter 1: The Daughters of Charity Come to Los Angeles**

**Summary:** Founded in 1633 in Paris, the Daughters of Charity earned an international reputation as skilled nurses and hospital managers. Their formal involvement in the United States began in 1850, when Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s Sisters of Charity (founded in 1809) unified with the French community. The Daughters’ transnational connections, as well as their administrative structure, rules, and training, made it easier for the sisters to adapt to the frontier environment of 1850s Los Angeles. After traveling to California via the Panama route, six Daughters (three Americans and three Spaniards) arrived in the city on January 6, 1856. The chapter closes with the sisters’ intercultural encounters and the challenges of establishing charitable institutions in a multiracial environment.
Discussion Questions:

1. What motivated Catholic sisters to enter into hospital care? Why were their services particularly needed in the nineteenth-century American West? (30-31, 33, 41-42; for the differences between Catholic sisters and nuns see 33, n. 24)

2. How did the Daughters’ transnational connections influence their migration to Los Angeles? (22-23, 34-25, 46-56; see 22, n. 8 for a summary of the relationship between the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s and the Daughters of Charity)

3. In contrast to the twentieth-century focus on formal degrees and certification, the Daughters of Charity based sisters’ vocational education on a mentoring system. What are the advantages of mentoring? The disadvantages? Why do we place more emphasis on academic degrees today? What is the role of mentoring in most professions today? In your opinion, what should it be? (see 36-38)

4. How did the Common Rules shape the sisters’ nursing care and hospital management? Why is it important to have a standard set of best practices and procedures? How did the Daughters’ administrative structure provide a solid foundation for the growth of their community and its services for poor persons? (31-32, 35-41)

5. The Daughters of Charity selected six women to start the mission in Los Angeles. How were they particularly suited to accomplish the challenges they would face? What did they lack? How do their motivations, backgrounds, and experiences compare with others who migrated to California in the 1850s? (42-46, 54-56)

6. Americans who migrated to 1850s California entered a multiracial social environment that few had any prior experience with at home. How did Sister Scholastica react to meeting those with different racial and cultural backgrounds? How did her impressions and actions differ from other migrants? How might her impressions be influenced by the class status (and religious affiliation) of those she interacted with? How did her impressions and interactions with the town’s residents influence the success of the sisters’ mission? (46-54)

Chapter 2: Public and Private Charity: Establishing a Hospital in Los Angeles

Summary: In 1858, the Daughters of Charity partnered with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to provide hospital care for the indigent sick. This chapter explores the legal context for the development of government-funded health care for poor persons in post-conquest California, and the expediency of public-private partnerships.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the Daughters of Charity partner with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to open a hospital? What were the benefits and pitfalls of this relationship for each party?

2. Whose responsibility is it to provide health care? Should special arrangements be made by government or private entities to furnish care for those in poverty or who cannot otherwise acquire it for themselves? Should governments and religious organizations work together to
provide health care for poor persons? Why or why not? How does the method of health care provision affect the relationship between citizens and the state?

3. How did race, class, and religious biases shape American hospital care in the nineteenth century? Who is best suited to ameliorate these biases—government or private charity? Are these biases still inscribed in our health care system today? How can we strive to provide more equitable care to all patients? (see 58-61)

4. In the mid-nineteenth century, many reformers “embraced ‘political domesticity’” and “sought to redef ine women’s place in the community through an expanded vision of ‘home.’” (61) How did the political subculture facilitate Catholic sisters’ entrance into hospital work? In what ways did sisters challenge the domestic ideology of the period? In what ways were they defined by it? (61-62, see also 161-163)

5. How does the establishment of the sisters’ hospital demonstrate the influence of Mexican and American social welfare traditions in Los Angeles? How did health care laws and institutions act as tools of Americanization in post-conquest California? (25-26, 62-67)

6. Considering the 1860 Infirmary Law as an example, how can health care regulations reveal assumptions and biases about the recipients of charitable relief? Why did the Daughters resist some regulations and not others? What does this say about their approach to hospital service? (72-74)

Chapter 3: The Daughters of Charity, the Challenges of Urban Growth, and the Professionalization of Medicine

Summary: Health boosterism, urban growth, and the professionalization of medicine complicated the Daughters’ partnership with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in the 1870s. This chapter lays the foundation for these developments, while chapter 4 explores the growing tensions between physicians, sisters, and supervisors during the decade.

Identifications: Health Boosterism; Los Angeles County Medical Association (LACMA); Dr. Joseph P. Widney; Immigrant Mutual Assistance Associations; Los Angeles Free Dispensary

Discussion Questions:
1. How did urban development and the professionalization of medicine affect the Daughters’ hospital in Los Angeles?

2. What types of people were admitted to the Los Angeles Infirmary in the 1870s? How did ethnicity, religion, and class affect an individual’s decision about where to seek hospital care? What do you think are the most relevant factors in these decisions today? (83-87)

3. Private charity organizations increasingly petitioned the California state government for aid in the 1870s, demonstrating “reformers’ growing reliance on state intervention before the Progressive Era.” (92) How did the age, ethnicity, and gender of the proposed recipients factor into reformers’ petitions? Who did they believe had a claim on government assistance and how can we reconcile these requests with other discriminatory actions taken by the state? (89-93)

4. How did the professionalization of medicine challenge the authority and autonomy of Catholic sisters as nurses and hospital administrators? (94-96, 100-102)
Chapter 4: Advocacy for the Sick Poor and a New County Hospital, 1870-1878

Summary: The Daughters of Charity challenged race and class biases as they acted as advocates for the poor during smallpox epidemics in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. However, a national economic panic reached Los Angeles in 1875, severely straining the relationship between the Daughters and supervisors. Revenue dropped just as demand for services increased, and reduced funding opened the hospital up to charges of inadequate care. Combined with physicians’ desires for greater control and boosters’ interest in building more modern facilities, these pressures resulted in the dissolution of the Daughters’ partnership with the county in 1878.

Identifications: “Pest House”; Grand Jury; Dr. Samuel W. Brooke; Scientific Charity; Los Angeles County Hospital and Farm

Discussion Questions:
1. How did class and racial biases shape the city government’s response to smallpox epidemics in Los Angeles? In what ways did the Daughters of Charity challenge these biases and act as advocates for the poor? (110-118)
2. How did the Daughters respond to the increasing criticism of the hospital in the 1870s? Were their responses effective? Why or why not? (118-125, 130-131)
3. After twenty years of collaboration, why did the Daughters of Charity and Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors choose to end their partnership in 1878? What is the significance of this decision? (118-125, 128-139)
4. What does the Daughters’ partnership with the county tell us about the efficacy of public-private partnerships? When are they beneficial? What factors should government officials and private organizations consider when entering into such a partnership? How do the issues of autonomy, philosophy, and control affect its effectiveness?

Chapter 5: Inventing a Modern Charity Hospital: Sisters’ Hospital, Los Angeles, 1880-1920

Summary: In the 1880s, the Daughters of Charity shifted their attention to the private medical marketplace, reinventing their institution as a modern charity hospital. They developed innovative financial strategies to promote the institution’s vitality, including contracting with railroad companies and the Marine Health Service, tapping oil reserves on their property, and building facilities that kept pace with rapid developments in the medical field. Throughout, the Daughters maintained their commitment to serve poor persons, providing inpatient and outpatient care as needed, as well as food and other resources to individuals who sought the sisters’ assistance.

Identifications: Sunset Hospital; The “Annex”; Outpatient Clinics

Discussion Questions:
1. When reinventing their institution as a modern charity hospital, what strategies did the Daughters use to maintain a competitive leadership position within the flourishing health care industry in Los Angeles? How did they use these strategies to further their religious mission to care for those in poverty?
2. The 1884 Sunset Hospital “represented a transition between a traditional ‘home’ for convalescence and a modern scientific facility.” (146) In what ways does the facility reflect the sisters’ traditions and approach to hospital care? How does it adapt to the contemporary demands of scientific medicine? (145-151)

3. Railroad companies pioneered third party insurance programs, shaping the delivery of hospital services in the twentieth century. How do the Southern Pacific’s policies prefigure tensions regarding employer-provided insurance plans (and workman’s compensation) today? What advantages did working with the railroads bring to Sisters’ Hospital? What was the downside of these programs? (151-158)

4. Consistent with their religious convictions that emphasized respect for the individual and human dignity, the Daughters of Charity extended assistance to those in need regardless of race or creed. In a society structured by race and class, how might this stance affect the sisters’ business? How does it distinguish Sisters’ Hospital from other social, economic, or political institutions at the time? (144-145, 154-155, 158-161, 204)

5. Women physicians such as Charlotte Blake Brown built their institutions around women’s “natural constituency” (the care of other women and children), while Catholic sisters primarily treated men. Why did these differences develop? What advantages and disadvantages does each trajectory hold for women in medicine? (161-163)

6. How does the “Annex” represent the further development of Sisters’ Hospital as a medical enterprise that incorporated a religious mission? (167-170)

7. What types of charity services did the Daughters extend to those in need? Were you surprised that the Daughters extended assistance to over 22,000 people in addition to those who received treatment in the hospital? Why or why not? What does this tell us about the sisters’ importance (and influence) in the community? (170-175)

Chapter 6: Modernization and Mission at St. Vincent’s Hospital School for Nurses, 1899-1925

Summary: While the professionalization of nursing challenged the expertise of vocational nurses after the Civil War, the Daughters of Charity adapted to changes within the hospital industry by instituting sisters-only diploma programs and founding nursing schools for laywomen in the 1890s. In 1899, the Daughters opened the training school at Sisters’ Hospital, Los Angeles. Nurses training kept pace with state requirements and industry standards, but also served as a means to instill the sisters’ approach to patient care, thereby furthering the Daughters’ religious mission.

Identifications: College Training School for Nurses; St. Vincent’s Hospital Training School for Nurses; Sister Helen McMahon; Registered Nurse

Discussion Questions:

1. The professionalization of nursing in the late nineteenth century challenged the expertise of vocational nurses such as the Daughters of Charity. Why did nursing reformers undermine, or at least minimize, the contributions of Catholic sisters to professional nursing? How did the Daughters of Charity respond to these changing expectations? What motivated them to institute nursing programs in their hospitals? (177-180)
2. What was the Daughters’ approach to nurses’ training? How did they balance state and industry requirements with desires to further their religious mission to serve those in poverty? (184-199)

3. Why did hospitals found nursing schools? How did educational requirements and clinical instruction change over time? (181-192)

4. What type of women chose to go to nursing school? What opportunities were available to them after graduation? What contributed to the difficulties that women of color had in entering the field? (192-195)

5. Nursing school administrators considered students’ education and training an equitable exchange for their labor. Was this fair? Why or why not? (183-192)

Conclusion: “A Monument to Christian Charity”: The New St. Vincent’s Hospital, 1927

Identifications: St. Vincent’s Hospital; 1927

Discussion Questions:
1. In the seventy-five years under study, the city of Los Angeles changed dramatically. How did the Daughters of Charity adapt to these changes? What was their role in the development of the metropolis?

Essay Questions:
1. Daughters of Charity consecrate their lives to the service of God. Choosing to forego marriage and having children, sisters spend their time perfecting the skills that will enable them to become effective servants of those in need. What opportunities are available to these women because of their chosen vocation? What challenges do they face? How do their experiences compare with other groups of nineteenth-century women?

2. Compare the experiences of the Daughters of Charity with two other groups who migrated to California in the 1850s. Consider motivations, activities, interactions with racial others, gender, class, etc.

For additional resources, you may wish to consult the N.A. Chandler Gold Rush Era Letters Collection at the Claremont Colleges Digital Library (http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/edm/landingpage/collection/cng).

The documents stored in “California, First Person Narratives” and “The Chinese in California” in the American Memory Collection at the Library of Congress may also be helpful (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html).

3. Historically, local governments have collaborated with private organizations such as the Daughters of Charity to assist those struggling in poverty. In your opinion, what is the proper relationship between government and private charity in caring for poor persons? What are the advantages of collaboration? The challenges? What lessons can we learn from the experiences of...
the Daughters and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors as our nation seeks to expand health care access through the Affordable Care Act?

4. After 1880, the Daughters of Charity sought to balance the demands for modernization with those of their religious mission, as the sisters transformed their hospital from a social welfare institution to a medical enterprise that incorporated a religious mission. What strategies did the Daughters use to engage in the modernization process? How successful were they? What issues complicated the process? In your opinion, did the Daughters of Charity achieve the appropriate balance between modernization and mission? Why or why not?

5. Discuss the development of nurses’ training between 1890 and 1920. Why did hospitals found nursing schools? How did educational requirements and clinical instruction change over time? What type of women entered nursing schools? How were the schools shaped by race and class? In what ways did the Daughters of Charity incorporate their traditions and approach to patient care into their nursing programs for laywomen?

Useful Resources:

Historical Context


Daughters of Charity


McNeil has written a number of articles concerning the history of the Daughters of Charity, many of which were published in the journal *Vincentian Heritage* and are available at: [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/)

**Digital Resources for Student Research**

*American Association for the History of Nursing.* Their website has a long list of internet resources (including primary sources) on the history of nursing, [http://www.aahn.org/resources/internet.html](http://www.aahn.org/resources/internet.html)

*Nursing History and Health Care.* Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing, University of Pennsylvania.Contains short scholarly articles about nursing history, including a timeline, hospital types, the development of nursing education, and workplace issues. [http://www.nursing.upenn.edu/nhhc/Pages/Welcome.aspx](http://www.nursing.upenn.edu/nhhc/Pages/Welcome.aspx)

*Via Sapientiae.* DePaul University’s Digital Repository. Contains electronic copies of books about the Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and Elizabeth Ann Seton. [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/) Some primary sources (such as the *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission*) are listed under Vincentian Journals and Publications. Many of them are in French. [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vin_journals/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vin_journals/)


*Vincentian Heritage.* The scholarly research journal focused upon the histories of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and greater Vincentian Family. Searchable collection of every article published. [http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/](http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/)

Final Note: Much of the primary source material written by Catholic sisters is held in private archives, but newspapers can be tremendously helpful when searching for information about their activities, fundraisers, and institutions in a given area. Students will occasionally find published memoirs, institutional histories, or accounts included in published document collections.