

Our Sisters of Charity and the Gangs of New York

By Maureen McKew

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About a year ago, I told you about the time Billy the Kid entered a bank in the Old West for the purpose of robbing it. Inside was a Sister of Charity. Billy took one look, tipped his hat, and walked back out. Anyone who has ever encountered a Sister of Charity would not be surprised by this. However, you might be surprised to learn that Sisters of Charity of New York took on an even greater challenge than Billy the Kid: the infamous gangs of 19th century New York. If you are in lower Manhattan, be sure to visit the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary on State Street for a wonderful exhibit titled “How the Sisters of Charity Tamed the Gangs of New York.” The exhibit will be on until August. The Chapel is on the site of a home of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity. The Sisters of Charity of New York trace their roots to the community she established over 200 years ago in Emmitsburg, Maryland, for the sake of helping poor people.

Now, how did the Sisters defeat the gangs? By opening orphanages and schools to house and educate the immigrant children, many of whom were homeless and alone. Their families perhaps died on the coffin ships bringing the famine Irish to New York in the 1840s and 1850s or succumbed to one of the diseases that raged through the notorious Five Points slum. Some female orphans found work as domestic servants in the homes of the wealthy. The boys were not employable, so many fell into crime.

When you visit the exhibit, you’ll see the number of schools, orphanages and hospitals the Sisters of Charity opened in New York City and upstate. They started the New York Foundling Hospital with just \$5.00. They established and ran the majority of the Catholic parochial schools. Their famous and sorely missed St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village cared for the survivors of RMS Titanic in April of 1912.

Until the 1970s, New Yorkers could spot the Sisters, who

dressed in distinctive habits that were actually the garb of 19th century widows like Elizabeth Seton. Many of the youngsters they educated went on to careers, business, politics, the law, medicine, priesthood, religious life, and various trades. And these students never forgot their teachers. When the Sisters boarded the old Fifth Avenue Coach Line, for example, many a bus driver would put his hand over the fare box. The clergy and teaching brothers did not receive the same privilege.

Because the Sisters have for the past 40 years dressed in modern clothes, they are difficult to pick out. But they are here and also in Latin America. Their monuments in New York are all around, not so much in buildings, but in the descendants of their students, including those 19th century street urchins they enabled to escape from poverty and crime.

By the way, while you are at the Sisters’ exhibit, be sure to take a look at the history of Watson House, founded by Charlotte Grace O’Brien, a woman cut from the same fine cloth as Mother Seton, to care for young immigrant girls.

Ed Note: Maureen McKew was taught by the Sisters of Charity at St. Ignatius Loyola. Her eighth grade teacher, Sr. Maria Monica Cassidy, told her that she might be able to make a living as a writer. She did.

Ms. McKew is the director of communications for the Archdiocesan Catechetical Office, as well as director of the New York Catholic Bible School Program. Her teachers at St. Ignatius would be proud, especially Sr. Maria Monica.

Our Lady of the Rosary welcomes visitors to this exhibit on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 1-4 pm or by appointment. Directions to the church and regular Mass times are listed on the church’s website at www.spcolr.org.

Above images: Five of the twelve panels in the exhibit now on display at the Seton Shrine at Our Lady of the Rosary in lower Manhattan.