

the famous order of Sisters of Charity, no doubt impelled thereto by the woful conditions of the hospitals in his day. So accustomed are we now to regard the good Sisters as "religious" that few of us perhaps realise how absolutely revolutionary a departure from, and defiance of customary religious forms, the ground principles of this great man really were. It seems altogether improbable that in his day his views did not appear heretical, dangerously radical, and subversive of order, though we do not now hear anything but praise. The Sisters were organised on a lay basis, and Vincent de Paul's express and reiterated instructions to them were—*not* to become "religious," because this state was unsuited to the practice of their vocation. They were to be placed under the absolute command of the physician, and Dr. Anna Hamilton says that the reason they were for so long the most popular order of Sisters was, because of this regulation. Vincent de Paul told them to obey the physician not only as to the care of the patient, but also in what concerned themselves. The beautiful words of his instructions are well known. Their convents should be the houses of the sick; their cells, their lodgings; their chapel, the parish church; their cloisters, the streets and the wards. Their "clôture" was to be obedience; their "grille," the fear of God; their veil, modesty. Finally, he warned them when the time should come that anyone would say to them, "It is better to be religious," and that they should heed the words and become monastic, that then their society would be ready for dissolution ("for extreme unction").

According to statistics compiled for Neckar, the Minister of Louis XVI., France had, in crusading times, two thousand charitable institutions of all kinds, and cared for forty thousand foundlings, forty thousand infirm and aged, and twenty-five thousand sick people, whereas in 1789 it had only seven hundred institutions in all. The reports of the Assistance Publique (corresponding to our Department of Public Charities) at the time of the French Revolution speak of "abuses of all kinds; excessive multiplication of employés and expenses; the afflicting spectacle of several patients placed in one bed" (not the case during the Middle Ages). Mons. Germain Garnier says in one such report, "It is proposed to institute (in the hospitals) a course of practical medicine, which does not exist in France, and to form a school of surgery to educate competent assistants."

The report speaks of the condition of the insane as being too horrible to describe, and says the well-being of patients was sacrificed to that of the attendants, who had a profuse and extravagant table, with wine far more costly than that of the patients.

Four rows of beds stood where there was only room for two, and contagious fevers, smallpox, wounds, and obstetrics were all heaped together.

The death-rate was 25 per cent., and one would suppose it would have been higher. In addition to other horrors, the slaughter houses for all Paris were situated directly under the Hôtel Dieu.

Dr. Anna Hamilton, in writing of these conditions, emphasises more than once that, even when sisters were in charge of the wards, the *actual nursing* was done by "mercenaries" or paid hirelings, and in the records of the hospital in the seventeenth century the complaint is made that the sisters were busy with religious duties instead of the care of the sick and that the latter were neglected.

The horrible condition of the Hôtel Dieu in Paris at the time of the French Revolution must not be taken as typical of all French hospitals, any more than the condition of Bellevue and Blockley Hospitals before trained nursing was established should be regarded as the state of all American hospitals. Many hospitals in the large provincial towns were well managed, and no doubt even the Hôtel Dieu had had its better days. Certainly, there must have been times when the sisters performed heroic labours, for we read that Cardinal Vitry, in speaking of this hospital, after admiring the fortitude of the nuns, who, he said, suffered without repugnance and even with joy, the fetid exhalations, excretions, and infections of the sick—so insupportable to all others that it seemed to him no other form of penitence could be compared to this martyrdom—goes on to say: "No one who has seen the Religious Sisters of the Hôtel Dieu not only dress wounds, wash their patients, and make their beds, but also in cold winter weather *break the ice* on the river Seine and stand knee-deep in the water to wash the filthy hospital clothes, can regard them as other than holy victims who, by excess of love and charity for their neighbours, hasten willingly to the death which awaits them among the 6,000 sick of the great hospital."

Whether this picture be overdrawn or not we cannot tell. If not, then we can only be grateful for modern machinery, and echo the words of the Cardinal. Surely, for us to criticise the work of such women were the height of comfortable insolence.

It is consoling to know that, in the time of St. Louis at least, the hospital owned some farms where the Sisters were sometimes sent—let us hope for recuperation.

(To be continued).

### Sincere Gratitude.

Mrs. McIntyre, the late Matron of Sir Julian Goldsmid's Home of Rest for Nurses at Brighton, desires to express, through the medium of this Journal, her sincere gratitude to the subscribers to the testimonial which has recently been presented to her.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)