



September 3, 2023 – Pentecost 14 (A)
The Feast of Constance and Her Companions:
The Martyrs of Memphis

On September 9, The Episcopal Church celebrates the witness of Constance and her companions, remembered along with other faithful Christians as the Martyrs of Memphis.

Yellow fever, a mosquito-borne illness that frequently affected the American South during the late 19th century, had reached an epidemic status in August 1878. Memphis, Tennessee, on the banks of the Mississippi River, had been afflicted by the disease several times before, leading citizens to flee the city en masse at the earliest signs of an outbreak. More than half of the city’s population left, leaving more than 20,000 people behind. According to *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, “As cases multiplied, death tolls averaged 200 daily. When the worst was over, ninety percent of the people who remained had contracted the fever; more than 5,000 people had died.”

Faithful Episcopalians and other Christians remained behind in the stifling heat to serve the city in its crisis. Chief among these saints were Constance, the Superior of the Sisters of St. Mary, and several other sisters of the order, who had come to Memphis some years earlier to found a girls’ school at St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral. The cathedral was located in the thick of the yellow fever epidemic, which provided ample opportunity to minister to the afflicted. They tended the sick, gave rest to the weary, soothed the suffering, and

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blessed the dying, making a special effort to find and take care of the numerous orphaned children of Memphis.

Constance and her companions knew well the danger and destruction that the fever represented, but would not be deterred from serving God and neighbor in that place. By the end of September, four of the sisters, along with two Episcopal priests and many unnamed volunteers, had succumbed to the fever: Sister Constance, Sister Thecla, Sister Ruth, Sister Frances, the Rev. Louis Schuyler and the Rev. Charles Parsons. Sister Constance's last words, uttered when she was no longer physically able to serve, are enshrined in the altar at St. Mary's Cathedral: "Alleluia! Osanna!"



Icon of Constance and Her Companions, from St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Memphis, Diocese of West Tennessee.

Collect for Constance and Her Companions

We give you thanks and praise, O God of compassion, for the heroic witness of Constance and her companions, who, in a time of plague and pestilence, were steadfast in their care for the sick and dying, and loved not their own lives, even unto death; Inspire in us a like love and commitment to those in need, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This bulletin insert was adapted from A Great Cloud of Witnesses' account of Constance and Her Companions.

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