

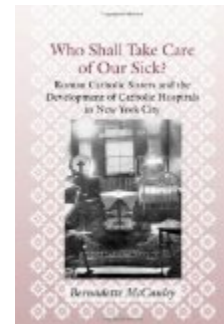
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernadette McCauley. *Who Shall Take Care of Our Sick? Roman Catholic Sisters and the Development of Catholic Hospitals in New York City.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xiii + 146 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8216-6.

Reviewed by Mary Kelly (Department of History, Franklin Pierce College)

Published on H-Catholic (May, 2006)



Devoted Laborers: Catholic Sisters and Their New York City Hospitals

Bernadette McCauley's name brings to mind Catherine McAuley, founder of the Mercy Order, whose members joined a small army of women religious connecting European motherhouses with American cities from the early nineteenth century onward. In so doing, they collectively established Catholic influence within contemporary health care and education systems. Bernadette McCauley's pithy survey of Catholic sisters and their New York hospitals examines the operations of women religious, usually termed nuns but "properly called *sisters*" (p. viii), within the nexus of city Catholicism, gender, politics, and ethnicity.

"The average person will need a hospital 75 times oftener than he will need a fire engine" (p. 82), according to a 1920s fundraiser from Mary Immaculate Hospital in Queens. New York City had long demonstrated the need for institutionalized care of the sick and infirm since antebellum-era almshouses paved the way for a more progressive approach to urban healthcare. Catholic sisters invested themselves and their resources in the developing hospital system, gravitating toward new roles, both within their orders and throughout the city. McCauley documents sisters' progress in founding and operating hospitals as cornerstones of their religious mission as an example of a spiritual vision infusing a real-world undertaking. The Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Mercy order, and the Dominican Sisters, among others, integrated into a Protestant-dominated, nativist-influenced New York landscape. They challenged contemporary gender-roles, raised women's sta-

tus within the diocesan hierarchy, and trained on-the-job as administrators, nurses, and fundraisers prescribing a uniquely Catholic brand of care.

McCauley's overview of the relationship between the sisters and their hospitals reveals figures at once visible and authoritative, yet veiled physically and culturally. But the insularity of convent life made way for secular influences from 1849 and the foundation of St. Vincent's Hospital, operated by the Sisters of Charity, as successive Irish, German, and Italian-based orders defied church and lay convention to found key institutions in the march toward organized health care. Reconfiguring the social and political parameters of the mid-century city, the sisters connected foundations of faith with the otherworld of public health. The intertwined agenda of devotion and practice originated within the orders, McCauley emphasizes, rather than by diocesan decree. Further, the sisters established care of the sick as a new mission for women religious previously associated primarily with teaching.

Retaining established Protestant hospital practice while cultivating a distinct Catholic sensibility, the orders reaped continued success into the twentieth century. Ascribing a feminist agenda to their operations neither downplays their loyalty to their spiritual mission nor exaggerates their contribution to a developing public role for women, and McCauley's research is strongest in situating sisters in a dual role as supervisors and laborers within a male-dominated public sphere. Unpaid and marginalized as authority figures, their careful

records reveal that women could own, operate, staff, and acculturate Catholic institutions as successfully as their unique status could allow.

Turning points such as the Civil War engendered more positive feelings toward Catholic caregivers, which differed from more negative cultural movements in evidence during previous Know Nothing years, but Progressive-era nursing schools eventually altered the hospital-training landscape. The ebbing of anti-Catholic feeling, such that hospital care no longer constituted a crucial dimension of church involvement, is noted by McCauley, but merits further attention as a theme of significance in the lives of the sisters and the city faithful. Reduced numbers of sisters further affected the future of Catholic hospitals. In the 1960s, tides of opposition flowed strongly against a once prominent New York mission and, McCauley empathetically notes, “their hospitals that remain are a quiet reminder of a different time for New York Catholics and their church” (p. 96). The waning of anti-Catholic expression and the relationship between the faith and the forces of modernization receive rather superficial treatment in the concluding chapters and epilogue. The book’s stronger focus on nineteenth-century decades of expansion and optimism overshadows attention to later decline in the sisters’ hospital operations. Other topics raised by McCauley should inspire further scholarly engagement. We yearn for more on the relationship between Ellen Hughes, first administrator of St. Vincent’s Hospital (as Sr. Angela of the Sisters of Charity), and her formidable brother John Hughes, for

example. That “the deliberateness of her efforts and her contribution to her church equal the archbishop’s in their significance in New York City” (p. x) is questionable; regardless, Ellen Hughes and her peers in sister-leadership deserve expanded attention. Additionally, a more comprehensive inquiry into the challenges experienced by Irish-born sisters, many of which formed part of the great exodus from the Great Famine, could broaden the history of Catholic New York.

McCauley is to be commended on a careful analysis of Catholic sisters’ professionalization and the course of change under their charge. Those interested in Catholic America (and New York in particular) will discover much of value here, while students of women’s experience will identify vital stages of women’s accession to power. Convent and diocesan histories occasionally lack sustained coverage of their inhabitants’ public-sphere operations, and McCauley’s research demonstrates sensitivity to their transcendence of cultural and doctrinal parameters. Writing the history of women religious requires understanding of a distinct status, and McCauley does not disappoint in this regard. She writes authoritatively on sisters’ adjustment of the religious and cultural boundaries of their existence, and introduces the reader to a complex web of personal sacrifice, Catholic ministry, and urban development with respect for the sisters’ limitations and success. Her meticulous attention to each dimension enriches the history of Catholic sisterhood, Catholic America, and modern America in general.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Mary Kelly. Review of McCauley, Bernadette, *Who Shall Take Care of Our Sick? Roman Catholic Sisters and the Development of Catholic Hospitals in New York City*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11734>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.