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Rose of the Hawthornes

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One of the most inspiring stories of self-sacrifice and charity contributed by a lay person to medical care is that of a woman who was eventually known as Mother Alphonsa. Born Rose Hawthorne, daughter of the illustrious Nathaniel, in Lenox, Massachusetts in 1831, she died as Superior of her religious community in 1926. This remarkable transition of a talented literary figure from the salons of Park Avenue to a humble servant of the poor of the East Side of New York is an edifying example of religion at work.

Rose was blessed by a fine family background from both her father and mother, whose model marriage and deep faith were exemplary. Like many literary figures who later became famous, Nathaniel Hawthorne could provide for his family only by long hours of arduous writing and the skillful management of his devoted and clever wife. The children were always allowed and urged to enter financial discussions concerning the family. Thus, Rose gained, at an early age, the ability to efficiently use whatever money was available. This faculty was later of inestimable value to her in her life's mission.

We first have an inkling of Rose's interest in Catholicism during an early trip to Rome, when she accompanied her father on a combined business and study tour. The entire Hawthorne family, with a sincere religious background, was inspired by the examples of Church art encountered in Italy. For Rose, however, the major impact was the chanting of Vespers by the Madames of the Sacred Heart. These glimpses into the sound family training and early leanings make the eventual role of Mother Alphonsa or the one hand more understandable but on the other somewhat of an enigma. For Rose Hawthorne did not always lead a sheltered life. She rapidly attained personal stature as a literary figure in her own right. She was becoming socially prominent just at the time when the climax of her life occurred.

In 1893, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop and her husband were received into the Church. Within a year she had begun her life's work of caring for the cancerous poor. She had decided to live life rather than to write about it. Her choice of how to accomplish this is the more striking when we realize that she had always been a sensitive soul who loved the beautiful things of life and to whom ugliness was repulsive. Once the die was cast, however, she willingly exchanged the security of home and the glamour of literary circles for the drudgery and insecurity of caring for the cancerous poor.

To Mrs. Lathrop, Rose of the Hawthornes, there was really little hesitation about the decision. She wanted to offer up the stench of life for the immortal fragrance of Heaven. Charitable acts and laborious service she felt were valueless unless combined with a spirit which spread to the soul. She often found the poor unattractive and the sick poor almost revolting, but she never allowed herself the luxury of the contemptuous indifference which we so often see. To Rose, the real charity was that exemplified by the Good Samaritan. She did no preaching about theoretical attempts to prevent poverty, but rather lent all her energy toward a practical attention to alleviating its drawbacks.

The decision of Mrs. Lathrop to enter her chosen field was brought about in typical fashion. When one of her young literary friends died of cancer, she was naturally upset but was not deeply moved, for this woman had ample funds to purchase what comforts were available. Shortly thereafter, however, she was struck by the sad plight of a hitherto capable and self-supporting seamstress who developed incurable cancer, became a destitute outcast, and died in loneliness. This cemented her decision to devote her energy and life to help poor people die happier. She had no illusions about cures. Let the scientists look to that. There would always be the cancerous poor dying, and these she felt she could help.

Accordingly, she went at great personal and financial sacrifice to the New York Cancer Hospital for a three months' training course. It was there that she finally overcame her natural revulsion for her chosen work and learned the practical aspects of fundamental bedside nursing care. While in training, she met the woman who was later to become her first patient. The poignant details of Rose’s first home for the sick poor, started with two rooms and $1.50, epitomizes her whole approach to life. She never sidestepped a problem regardless of the odds against her. A less resourceful person would not always have succeeded. She was gradually able to increase the number of rooms as the demands of prospective patients grew. Progress was halting and arduous. Money was very scarce. Often the furnishings were shabby and second-hand, but they were always immac-
ulate. Not infrequently, crates and boxes served as chairs until some stalwart friend could contribute from a meagre income. East Side New York was incomparably poorer then than now.

As more patients sought care, the need for personnel became as pressing as that for materiel. We gain considerable insight into the strength of Mrs Lathrop from the writings of the future Mother Rose, who in 1897 as Mrs Alice Huber, came from Louisville to help in the nursing problem, but was about to leave on more than one occasion because of the poverty and hardships. But when she saw Rose give up her own bed for one of these poor creatures, and realized the sacrifices of her leader, she became a staunch supporter and eventually succeeded Mother Alphonsa. Anyone dealing with the terminal care of cancer patients has likewise learned that such help cannot be bought. An appeal to higher motives is necessary. It is for such reasons that many of our leading institutions for terminal care have a religious background.

By 1899, Rose and her group had banded together and were ecclesiastically recognized as the Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer. They had now moved to larger quarters and were caring for 12 to 15 patients constantly. Our protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, today hospital and dispensary aid to the sick poor tends to be impersonal and superficial. This was never so with Mother Alphonsa's group. We could learn many a lesson from reading of her charitable acts and the contagion of her spirit in her colleagues. It was said that her dying cancerous poor were often more serene than the well-to-do benefactors who came to visit.

Later, Rose Hawthorne became Mother Alphonsa of the Sister Servants of Relief of the Third Order of St. Dominic. But she never gave up her close contact with the patients. She even procured a nearby lot so that she could supervise their funerals and burials, and thus complete her task of caring for the cancerous poor physically and spiritually. On the other hand, she never completely lost contact with the world. For, although she regretfully would not so much as travel to Concord for the centenary of her now famous father, she numbered many of her former literary friends among her contributors. Letters of encouragement with money to match from one S. L. Clemens were among these. Before the end of her productive and happy life in 1926, Mother Alphonsa, Rose of the Hawthornes had 40 faithful Sister Servants and more than 200 patients in two separate homes.

In the world in which we live today, the great understanding given by the Spirit of Wisdom must involve us in a lot of suffering. We shall be obliged to see the wound that sin has inflicted on the people of the world. We shall have X-ray minds: we shall see through the bandages people have laid over the wounds that sin has dealt them; we shall see the Christ in others; and that vision will impose an obligation on us for as long as we live, the obligation of love: when we fail in it, we shall not be able to escape in excuses and distractions as we have done in the past; the failure will afflict us bitterly and always. — from THE REED OF GOD by Caryll Houselander, copyright 1944, Sheed & Ward, Inc., N. Y.