

The Catholic Church and the San José Clinic: One Hundred Years of History

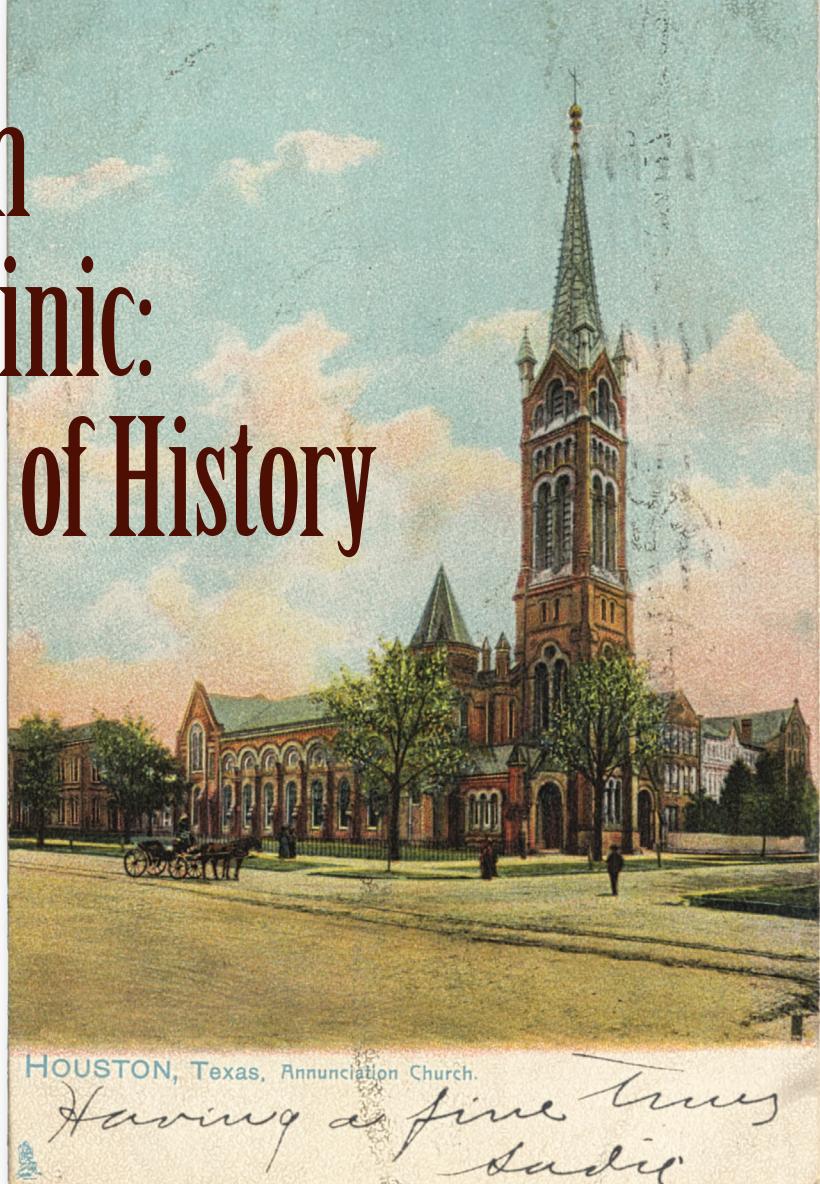
By Miles Bednorz

**“Among our tasks as
witnesses to the love of Christ
is that of giving a voice to
the cry of the poor.”¹**

— Holy Father Pope Francis

Emerging from the rapidly growing congregation of St. Vincent's Catholic Church, Annunciation Church became Houston's second Catholic Church when it was dedicated in 1871 and is the oldest existing church building in Houston. Postcard date, 1907.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections,
University of Houston Libraries.



The Catholic Church has always been the foundation of the San José Clinic. Catholic groups and institutions like the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, and the Charity Guild of Catholic Women have provided financial support and leadership throughout the clinic's history. Many Catholics, including Maureen Sanders, the president and CEO of the clinic and a self-described “cradle Catholic” who has been raised in the church since birth, have felt drawn to the clinic as an opportunity to “live their faith in their work.” His Eminence



Appointed Archbishop of Galveston-Houston in 2006, His Eminence Daniel Cardinal DiNardo guides 1.7 million Catholics in their faith, while continuing to support the San José Clinic as a member of the board of directors.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston, sits on the clinic's board of directors, highlighting a commitment by the Catholic Church to the San José Clinic's mission, and from 1954 to 2010, the clinic stood on land owned by the Archdiocese.² For a century, Catholics who have devoted their lives to serving the sick and needy have cared for the San José Clinic and its patients.

Meeting the Needs

After becoming the fourth bishop of Galveston in 1918, Bishop Christopher Byrne expanded the church ministry among African Americans and Mexican Americans in Houston and made local clergy a priority, ordaining about seventy priests who were Texans. In the early 1920s, he worked with Monsignor George Walsh, pastor at the Annunciation Church, to address the high infant mortality rates among Mexican children. Characterized as a man who loved the poor, Walsh was distressed that so many infants and children of Mexican families were dying young and asked the local chapter of the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), now the Charity Guild of Catholic Women, to help establish a free clinic in his parish to help

In response to rising mortality rates among Houston's Mexican community, Msgr. Walsh recruited Catholic women to assist in founding and running la Clínica Gratuita.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.



the struggling Mexican community.³ Clínica Gratuita, later renamed the Mexican Clinic and then San José Clinic, was founded in a collaboration between Walsh, the church, and the NCCW.

Walsh was born in Washington, D.C. in 1874, and came to Texas sometime after the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, when the Catholic Church sent him to St. Patrick's parish in Galveston as pastor. He took charge of Annunciation Church in Houston on January 1, 1914. Nine years later, he was granted the ecclesiastical title of "monsignor" for his accomplishments serving the church. His involvement in the establishment of the San José Clinic was not a surprise, as he often gave generously to charity. Parishioner W. E. Kendall, whose wife, Theodora, was a founding member of the Charity Guild, called Walsh one of the kindest and most generous men he knew. Before the Community Chest, a predecessor of United Way, became involved with the clinic, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that "[the clinic] often had hard sledding getting together enough money to take care of the

needs of the sick and afflicted. Monsignor Walsh, in those days, was the chief support of the institution. When the money would run low, he would ask those in charge, 'Well, don't you need a little money today?' And he would make a substantial donation out of his own pocket."⁴

Walsh later established several other institutions to help his parish, including the Catholic Women's Club to support rural women seeking jobs in Houston and the Convent of the Good Shepard for "young female victims of divorced households." While the clinic is Walsh's only lasting creation, he lived a life in service to his community. At the time of his death in 1933, the clinic was regarded as one of the largest charity operations in Houston, serving 1,000 patients a month.⁵

More than a decade later, Bishop Byrne searched for someone to manage the clinic, which had lost volunteer workers during World War II. In 1946, he invited the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception to head up the operation. This congregation was founded in Brazil by German missionaries in 1910, and many settled in Patterson, New Jersey, in the 1920s. Sister Leonardine and Sister Manuela, who both had an interest in the welfare of Mexican Americans, came to Houston to honor Byrne's request for help. They took over management of the clinic on October 1, 1946, and held their first board meeting one month later.⁶ At the time, the congregation also operated St. Elizabeth Hospital in Houston's Fifth Ward, which served the African American and Mexican American communities.

On March 19, 1947, Bishop Byrne placed the clinic under the protection of St. Joseph on his feast day and renamed it San José Clinic. Sr. Leonardine and Sr. Manuela ran the San José Clinic until 1954 when they withdrew from management due to a shortage of nurses at St. Elizabeth Hospital. Bishop Wendelin Nold, who succeeded Bishop Byrne in 1950, then asked the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word to step in and manage the clinic.⁷

Charitable Sisters

Based in Houston, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word is a congregation dedicated to serving the sick. In 1866, Bishop Claude Marie Dubuis noticed sickness and poverty in the Diocese of Galveston and, after many unsuccessful attempts to bring nursing and hospital sisters to the region, founded a new congregation to establish the hospitals his diocese so badly needed. Three nursing sisters from Dubuis's native France – Sisters Mary Blandine Mathelin, Mary Joseph Roussin, and Mary Ange Escudé – volunteered for the mission, and these founding members of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word arrived in Galveston on October 25, 1866. The sisters began working at St. Mary's Infirmary, the first Catholic hospital in Texas, in April 1867.⁸

The Sisters of Charity have been working in Houston since at least 1887, when they established their first permanent institution outside of Galveston, St. Joseph's Infirmary, in downtown Houston, created at the invitation



Run by the Missionary Sisters of Immaculate Conception in its early years, St. Elizabeth Hospital in Houston's Fifth Ward served San José patients who needed more specialized care. The Sisters of Charity later ran the hospital in the 1980s.

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.



Founded in Galveston in 1867, St. Mary's Infirmary was the state's first Catholic hospital. Photo courtesy of Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

of Father Thomas Hennessy of Annunciation Church. In 1886, the Sisters of Charity entered into an agreement with Harris County to care for patients at the request of the Commissioners Court. They tended the sick in Houston and Galveston during a smallpox epidemic in 1890 and during yellow fever outbreaks in the late 1800s. As a gesture of appreciation from the city of Houston, the sisters, easily noticeable in their black and white habits, received free trolley rides around the city.⁹

In 1900, Galveston was devastated by a hurricane that killed over 8,000 people. It washed away St. Mary's Orphan Asylum, killing ten sisters and ninety children. After the storm, the sisters rebuilt their orphanage, repaired damage to St. Mary's Infirmary, and continued their work in Galveston. In the 1920s, however, the congregation decided that Houston would be a more suitable location for its headquarters. A new convent, located just east of what is now Interstate 45 at the corner of Lawndale Street and Wayside Drive, was built on seventy-two acres of wooded land and named Villa de Matel to honor Mother Jeanne Chezard de Matel, who founded the Order of the Incarnate Word in seventeenth-century France from which the local congregation is derived. The convent officially opened as a novitiate for young nuns in 1926 and began training women who wished to join the congregation.

*Sister Teresa of the
Sisters of Charity of
the Incarnate Word
was devoted to caring
for the poor. Her
success in leading the
San José Clinic earned
her recognition from
President Ronald Reagan
in 1983.*

Photo courtesy of
the San José Clinic.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
December 20, 1983

It gives me great pleasure to send my warm greetings to the San José Clinic as it celebrates its sixtieth anniversary.

Your long record of continuous service attests to your ability to meet and understand the varied health needs of the people of your community. You have reached out with compassion to treat the poor, meeting the medical needs of people of varied cultures. Your success is a tribute to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and to your staff and volunteers.

Nancy joins me in sending congratulations to everyone associated with the Clinic and to its patients. We share your concerns for the people you care for and are grateful for your dedicated work on their behalf.

We send all good wishes for the future.

Ronald Reagan

Villa de Matel became the official motherhouse of the congregation in 1928 when Mother M. Placidus began directing the sisters' apostolic work from the convent.¹⁰

In 1954, after the resignation of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception from the San José Clinic's management, Bishop Nold appealed to Mother Elizabeth, the superior general of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, for help. With her approval, on June 4, 1954, the Sisters of Charity took over management of the San José Clinic. Sister Mary Angela became the new administrator and Sister Dominica served as the new supervisor. The Sisters of Charity helped the clinic relocate to its new building at 301 Hamilton Street just two years into their



The San José Clinic has been managed by Catholic women since its inception and was placed under the care of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word in 1954. Sister Teresa, center, arrived in 1966 and was the longest-serving administrator, pictured here with clinic staff.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic

tenure. The new space had twenty-four rooms, and "the most modern type of medical and dental outpatient care ... provided by doctors and dentists ... on a volunteer basis." Most importantly, it allowed the sisters to continue carrying out their mission to help the sick and the suffering.¹¹

"Live My Faith"

Over the past sixty-seven years, members of the Sisters of Charity have made notable contributions to the San José Clinic. The longest-serving administrator was Sister Teresa Quinn, who led the clinic from 1966 to 1985, seeing it through multiple expansions and nurturing partnerships with providers and funders to offer the best possible care. Accolades for Sr. Teresa came from near and far, including President Ronald Reagan who wrote to her at the clinic's sixtieth anniversary: "Your long record of continuous service attests to your ability to meet and understand the varied health needs of the people of your community. You have reached out with compassion to treat the poor, meeting the



Sister Kathleen Howard introduced computing technology to the clinic as computers began to be widely available, enabling the clinic to keep up with the times and continue providing reliable services to its patients.

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.



Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, blessing an addition to the clinic in 1987, became the first Archbishop of Galveston-Houston in 1985 and served until 2006. Stan Marek, a long-time clinic supporter (not shown), called Archbishop Fiorenza a visionary when it came to the clinic and its mission because he understood people and poverty.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

medical needs of people of varied cultures. Your success is a tribute to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and to your staff and volunteers.”¹²

Sister Kathleen Howard joined the clinic on May 6, 1984, in the newly created position of director of social service, established to connect patients with non-medical resources. In addition to the social services area, she reorganized the medical records and registration departments and worked with the Sisters of Charity Healthcare System in 1987 to install the first computer system at the clinic for patient registration. This was a major advancement and helped the clinic keep pace in a rapidly changing world of technology. Soon after the installation of the computer system, Sr. Kathleen was reassigned to a new position at Villa de Matel. The 1987 Annals notes that Sr. Kathleen “will be greatly missed” after her short time with the clinic.¹³

Sister Margaret Bulmer also made notable contributions to the clinic during her time as executive director, from 1985 to 1990 and from 1992 to 1999. Sr. Margaret was kind and caring, according to Dr. Lloyd Pate. He remembered that



Serving as director of the San José Clinic for a total of twelve years, Sister Margaret Bulmer focused on ensuring that the clinic’s services were widely accessible to those in need.

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

she once asked him to treat a homeless person with a red eye whom she had brought to the clinic, despite the fact that this person was not a registered patient. She looked for ways to make care more accessible and help those in need. In 1986, Bulmer arranged for the price of dental care at the clinic to be lowered, as she felt that many families did not have the extra money to pay for dental services. The next year, Sr. Margaret led an effort to help candidates seeking amnesty under a new immigration law receive their required health examinations by organizing monthly events to provide free exams at the clinic.¹⁴

After taking a sabbatical to return to nursing, Sr. Margaret resumed her duties as executive director at the San José Clinic in 1992 and picked up right where she had left off. She said in 1993 that the clinic is “the place where I can live my faith” and that she kept a copy of the Beatitudes, or Catholic blessings, on the wall in her office to remind her of her mission to help the poor and the needy. In 1996, under her leadership, the clinic opened a learning center that offered GED classes as well as classes in English, reading, and writing. After her departure from the clinic in 1999, Sr. Margaret left a powerful legacy. Stacie Cokinos, who became the clinic’s executive director in 2001 and served for ten years, said that Sr. Margaret was “always referred to with such affection” and “never left the minds of the clinic or the patients.” On May 27, 2017, Sr. Margaret celebrated her Diamond Jubilee with the congregation, when she renewed her religious vows and commitment to the mission of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.¹⁵

Caring for All

The work of the Sisters of Charity did not stop with the San José Clinic or St. Joseph Hospital. In 1999, the sisters combined their healthcare systems in Houston and San Antonio to form CHRISTUS Health. Six years later, however, the



The Sisters of Charity established St. Joseph Hospital in 1887. The maternity wing added in 1937 welcomed so many new Houstonians it became known as "Houston's birthplace." The hospital and San José Clinic maintained a long relationship to provide patients with needed care.

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

Sisters of Charity and CHRISTUS decided to sell Houston's St. Joseph Hospital after it became clear that "a general hospital dedicated to serving the underserved cannot endure" on its limited income due to decreasing Medicare payments and the number of uninsured patients. While the Sisters of Charity and the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston supported the sale, they affirmed that this would not be the end of their work to provide accessible and affordable healthcare in Houston. Sister Olive Boredelon and Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza announced that the proceeds from the sale would go to the San José Clinic and that "the mission of St. Joseph Hospital would continue."¹⁶

After the hospital's sale, the CHRISTUS Foundation began looking for a new home and initiated talks with the clinic about constructing a new building to house both the foundation and the clinic. After more than fifty years at the 301 Hamilton location, the clinic was in bad shape. Les Cave, former president of the CHRISTUS Foundation, said that the building "was beyond its suitability for them to run a clinic out of there." The roof leaked, and, Cave added, "it wasn't set up for people with wheelchairs and disabilities" because it had no elevator. A new building would give the clinic's volunteers more space to better treat their patients. In 2008, the San José Clinic and the CHRISTUS Foundation agreed that the foundation would construct a new building to house them both, and the clinic would rent its space from CHRISTUS for one dollar a year. Two years later, the San José Clinic moved to the new, 55,000-square-foot, three-story building located at 2615 Fannin Street.¹⁷

While the San José Clinic is a Catholic institution staffed and managed largely by Catholics, those who receive care are not required to be Catholic and a large portion of the clinic's patients do not identify as such. Stan Marek, Houston businessman and longtime supporter of the clinic, insisted that patients are "[people] of God [and they] will be

taken care of" regardless of their religion or any other factor. Dr. Michelle Herrera, current chairman of the San José Clinic board of directors, pointed out that the clinic leadership "just happens to be a group of Catholics who decided to address some of the social issues in [Houston]."¹⁸

Since its founding, the San José Clinic has always received the full support of the Catholic Church. Bishops have recruited sisters to manage the clinic. Clergy have attended openings where they have blessed the clinic. The Charity Guild of Catholic Women, who provided the initial funds to start the clinic one hundred years ago, operate a consignment shop with a part of the proceeds going to the clinic. Even those who are not part of the church leadership, like CEO Maureen Sanders, are closely tied to the organizations that operate and support the clinic. Sanders has been around the Sisters of Charity her entire life. She explained, "[N]ot only was I born in one of their hospitals, their nuns gave me my Irish name. I was educated by them for twelve years." Now, she concludes, being chosen to head the San José Clinic in a building that is owned by the Sisters of Charity and CHRISTUS Foundation "was definitely a sign that this is where I needed to be."¹⁹

Msgr. Walsh saw the deprivation in the Mexican community in the 1920s, and today that extends to immigrants who have come to Houston from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, as well as people born in this country who are in need. Cardinal DiNardo reflected on Houston's diversity, saying, for the clinic to "care for – every day – medical [and] practical care for people is part of ... our mission as a church. To reach people where they are day by day," he said, "and to help people get through the day is spectacular."²⁰ □

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The Charity Guild of Catholic Women will celebrate its centennial at the same time as the San José Clinic, as they both formed in response to Msgr. Walsh's request in 1922. The Charity' Guild's Centennial Committee is coordinating a year-long commemoration.

Photo courtesy of Kathleen Falcona and the Charity Guild of Catholic Women.