



Rose Hawthorne Lathrop 1851-1926

Cancer. Does the thought of it send an uneasy ripple through your mind? Difficult as it is today, imagine what it was like in the 1800's. People falsely believed it was contagious. They thought you could catch cancer from others.

Rose Hawthorne Lathrop listened aghast to Rev. Alfred Young. The story he told was of a young seamstress, a sensitive and cultured woman, who took ill of cancer. Terrified, her landlady threw her out of her room. The girl's life savings were eaten up in a hopeless search for a cure. A private hospital sent her to a city hospital. The city hospital packed her off to a poorhouse on Blackwell Island. Alone and friendless, thrown among criminals and brutes, she died in despair. Her body was dumped into a pauper's grave.

Back in her room, Rose mourned over what she had just heard. She was no stranger to sorrow herself. In 1881, her only child, Francie, died, just five years old. Later her marriage broke on the rocks of her husband's alcoholism. But her own woes seemed minor in light of the story she had just heard. Surely Christ expected her to do something. Rose fell to her knees in tears and prayed, "God help me to help them."

Rose knew that cancer struck terror into the hearts of rich and poor alike. Her friend, Emma Lazarus, had died of cancer. Emma was the author of the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses. . ." Emma's end was eased by all the comforts that money could buy and the love of a caring family. Rose agonized in thinking, "What must cancer be like for the poor who had no family, no comforts, no money?"

A plan formed in Rose's mind. Although she was next door to poverty herself, she would rent cheap rooms in the poorest part of town. There she would offer free nursing to poor and homeless women.

What made you "choose such an awful occupation?" asked friends. It was a good question. Well-born and cultured, Rose had moved in the highest literary circles of New England and New York. Her father was the famed novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*. Rose seemed destined to follow in his

steps. Her stories appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *St. Nicholas* magazines. She gave up all of this when she took a house in the slums to change icky bandages. She wrote again but only to fund her work and promote it through a paper called *Christ's Poor*.

In the summer of 1896, at age 45, Rose trained as a nurse at the New York Cancer Hospital, the first institution in the nation dedicated to training cancer treatment at a time when general hospitals in the city did not admit patients with cancer. Later that year, she founded a charitable organization named after Rose of Lima as Sister Rose's Free Home to care for impoverished cancer patients. At first, she went to the homes of patients but, in October 1896, she rented a three-room slum apartment that sat between horse stables on Scammel Street in the poor Lower East Side. The street was noisy, the work exhausting. But from that humble beginning, a great work was built. A Dominican priest witnessed the work done there and in February 1899 and encouraged her to join the order. She became known as Mother Alphonsa. The order she founded, now known as the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, opened a facility called St. Rose's Home on Water Street in Manhattan before moving to Cherry Street settling in what is now Rosary Hill Home in Hawthorne.

By the time of her death in 1926, Rose had ministered to thousands of cancer patients. During her thirty years of cancer work, she drew hundreds of helpers into the task. Spurred by her prayers and appeals, hospitals were built for cancer patients, largely through voluntary contributions.

At Rose's funeral, Reverend James A. Walsh, a friend of many years stated, "She loved all with a heart full to overflowing, and she loved God with her whole mind. . .I do not exaggerated when I say that she could have taken her place in the chronicles of American literature, but she sought higher things. Her mind flew to God; she gave it to Him; she diverted it to His purposes, and He accepted it, and she loved Him with her whole mind." Merely a footnote in literature, Rose stands as a giant in that which I Corinthians, chapter 13 tells us really lasts.