EXCERPTS

from the ARCHIVES

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Among the pages of the 1849 St. Xavier Catalogue is a small announcement that is easy to miss. A note at the bottom of the page regarding the annual July graduation exercises reads: "On account of the prevalence of the Cholera, at the present time, the greater part of these Exercises, and the conferring of Degrees have been postponed till the opening of the next session."

Commencement was thus suspended, students were sent home early, and for the first time in school history—though not the last—a pandemic disrupted the end of an academic year.

Cholera was a persistent torment for much of the world throughout the 19th century, and Cincinnati was no exception. After being ravaged by an outbreak in 1832 that killed 2% of the city's 30,000 inhabitants, the dreaded "blue death" returned to the Queen City seventeen years later with a brutal vengeance: this time, 5% of the city's now 115,000 residents perished. Little was known about the illness at the time as the germ theory of disease had yet to be fully developed, and it would still be a few years before British physician Dr. John Snow identified contaminated water as the primary carrier of the deadly Vibrio cholerae bacterium.



Mary's cholera crown, as shown in the 1940 yearbook.

On June 27, 1849, shortly before being dismissed for the school year, a group of St. Xavier students led by Peter "Cheri" Nogues adopted the following proclamation: "RESOLVED—That we offer to the Blessed Virgin a solemn vow that if all the students of this institution be preserved from death by the cholera during the season of its prevalence in this city, we will cause to be made two golden crowns, one for the Blessed Virgin and one for the infant Jesus, to be placed on their respective images in the chapel of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin."

There was but one holdout among the student body, a boarder. Legend has it he refused to sign the resolution, boldly declaring he was "not afraid to chance the risk." According to one source, he later succumbed to cholera while traveling home and was buried on the banks of the Mississippi.

Miraculously, all the signatories survived the summer, and the students kept their word. On February 2, 1850, they placed two golden crowns on a statue of Mary and Jesus during a solemn ceremony in the school chapel. The inscription on the larger crown read: "Presented to the Blessed Virgin Mary by the students of St. Xavier College in gratitude for her special protection during the cholera of 1849."

Cincinnati continued to deal with the "blue death" in subsequent years, but later outbreaks paled in comparison to the scourge of 1849. The crowns themselves were eventually lost before being rediscovered in 1904. They were then misplaced again until 1938 when Fr. Ladislaus Majerowski, S.J. found the larger crown in the attic of the school, while the smaller crown was said to have been found in a chapel at Xavier University. Together, both were displayed at the high school during feasts of the Blessed Mother and Child.

The cholera crowns were last seen in 1958. A letter held in the Xavier University Archives indicates the crowns may have been accidentally discarded, but we may never know for sure. Perhaps one day they will be found yet again. Hope springs eternal.