

**Harriet Starr Cannon**  
**First Mother Superior of the Sisterhood of St. Mary (1823-1896)**

*Observed 7 May*



Harriet Cannon's early life was filled with tragedy. Both parents died when she was only one year old. She and her sister were taken in by relatives. Once her sister married, Harriet hoped to live with her, but soon the sister had died as well. Having been earning her living teaching piano, but wanting a more settled and focused life, she joined the Sisters of the Holy Communion, an Episcopal order of deaconesses recently established under the guidance of William Augustus Muhlenberg. The middle of the 19th century was a time of dramatic and positive changes in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole. In addition to inspiring liturgical renewal and missionary zeal, this was a time of recovering monasticism and the 'religious life' in a variety of forms and settings, particularly focused on service to 'the least of these'. Harriet enjoyed the deaconesses' service to the poor, but desired a more spiritual life as well. Therefore in 1865 she joined in founding another Episcopal order, the Sisters of Saint Mary. She became the first Mother Superior of this new order of nuns dedicated to prayer and the care of poor children and troubled women. Over the next several years, they established numerous schools. It was members of this order whose death in extraordinarily self-forgetful service to the victims of the yellow fever epidemic led them to be renowned as the 'Martyrs of Memphis'. Her biographer, Morgan Dix, described Mother Harriet as "one of the noblest and most remarkable women of our day; [with] a vigorous mind, a clear intellect, a resolute will, and a great heart full of love to God and man."

*Lessons* 2 Esdras 2:15-24; Psalm 131; Hebrews 13:1-2,5-8,15-16; Mark 9:33-37

*Collect* Gracious God, you called Mother Harriet and her companions to revive the religious life in the Episcopal Church by founding the religious community of St. Mary, and to dedicate their lives to you: Grant that, after their example, we may ever surrender ourselves to the revelation of your holy will; through our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.