

# *The* **MAST** *Journal*

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Dear Sisters and Friends,

One of the maxims I heard in the novitiate on the subject of apostolic productivity was, "Wear out or rust out." I understood this to mean that religious life presented two basic options: Spend yourself and exhaust your energy for the good of others, or take it easy and prove that your life was good for nothing. That was a choice? After reviewing the essays in this celebratory volume (additional essays about our foundresses will appear in the next issues), I would submit that the maxim is indeed part of the original charism, and got passed on to us by the first generations of Mercy women in the U.S. It's one of those "sounds of Mercy" we recognize, like the trill of Frances Warde's little bell renewed anew by Sheila Carney, R.S.M., hostess of the Pittsburgh celebration in June, 1994.

Catherine McAuley herself "wore out." She died of tuberculosis, that stalker of hard-working women who counted service to the needy a higher priority than "preventive medicine" for oneself. I imagine that coughs were a natural death was on its way, a warning to get as much good done as you could, not a pledge to get to a doctor as soon as possible. Some maternally-minded superiors acknowledged the need for providing a proportional relation between work and rest. But Mercy women shared the lot of ordinary people: there was little time, other than emergencies, for visiting doctors that might have prolonged their lives. And a century ago, it wasn't the spiritual fashion to focus on the benefits of "reverse ministry," that is, defining the ways the care-giver is in fact more greatly served by those who receive service.

Focused on finding solutions for immediate needs, these women understood themselves to be the creators of organizational solutions to social problems, professional travelers, and ecclesial diplomats. Striking is the youth of many women in the pioneer groups who set sail for America. They typically wore themselves out in the face of overwhelming needs and too few co-workers. If we are invited to relive the "founding moment" today, we have certainly met them on this last point. Some of our sisters lived a long time, seeming to thrive on poor food, separation from native culture and kin, cleaning out messy basements, arduous travel, over-work, thin comforts, exposure to contagious diseases, separation for cash, attendance at a succession of funerals, short vacations, stormy seasons in community life, and a steady diet of difficulties with clerics.

This is probably one of the few times in the memory of the Sisters of Mercy, other than refectory reading of Mother Austin Carroll's *Leaves from the Annals*, that we can intuit our history as a great swell which is breaking on the shore of the next millennium. The overview presented at the 150th Anniversary celebration breaks open our archival record here, and continuing in our next issue, affirms the essential service of our archivists and historians.

We commonly use the phrase "reinventing the wheel" to refer to persons or groups who have lost track of the civilizing fundamentals we call tradition and culture. The stories here are proof we have kept the wheels in good repair. Our sisters have found ways to preserve and organize original documents, narratives, newspaper clippings, diary records — even dignified versions of the gossip — that ground Mercy women's spirit and achievement in this century. A good deal of this material, I suspect, has not been published before, or has appeared only in briefer form. Like the gospels when they were first written, this record of women's service is hardly the stuff of national best-seller lists. I might call it redemptive non-fiction which confirms the faith of the believers.

I am grateful to Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., and Mary Loyola MacDonald, R.S.M., both of Auburn, CA, for assistance in editing the papers that appear in this volume.

With good hope,

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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# Founding Women: A Composite Portrait

Helen Marie Burns, RSM

*"With this as our heritage—what may we not justly hope?" The question lingers. Our hearts catch momentarily. Must we...Can we...Dare we again hope?*

Miss Hester Strange, called in religion Mary Elizabeth, dared such virtue. She, indeed, proclaimed hope a life-long stance in the ring motto taken on the day of her profession: In te Domine speravi (I hope in you Lord). This early chronicler of the Sisters of Mercy began the annals of St. Leo's Convent (Carlow) with clear intent and a quiet touch of hope:

The annals of St. Leo's are presented with deep and long cherished affection...to the weal of the Sisterhood...[This] unskilled annalist humbly hopes:

- 1) to foster sentiments of the most lively gratitude for God's ineffable bounty to us...
- 2) to cherish that grateful remembrance of benefactors which ever characterizes the truly noble and religious mind...
- 3) to invite to a more cordial love of our Holy Institute and esteem for our...vocation....

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**For the historian, as for each of us, who we are influences where we stand. Where we stand influences what we see. What we see, in turn, influences what we understand.**

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Hers, then, was never an unbiased recording of events and experiences. She wrote knowing for whom she wrote and to what desired end. Elizabeth Strange understood what historians have only recently begun to admit: all history is story. That is, all history—the most scientific and the most imaginative—is written from a particular standpoint. For the historian, as for each of us, who we are influences where we stand. Where we stand influences what we see. What we see, in turn, influences what we understand. Facts, even scientific facts, as Thomas Kuhn's work on paradigms so clearly proves, are subject to the filter of the beholder. Beneficiaries of historical writing, then, must receive these works with an active mind and heart. Context, intent, biases, what is recorded, what is not recorded, and why become important aspects of historical analysis.

The interaction of all these pieces constitutes history rather than facts alone. In this interaction, the present finds its continuity with the past and the future. Primarily, it is such continuity that makes history a worthwhile enterprise, anniversaries worthwhile celebrations, and remembering an important human activity. Through the phenomenon of history, human beings learn about themselves in relation to an unfolding cosmic energy. Brian Swimme describes the phenomenon in his book *The Universe is a Green Dragon*:

*Our ancestry stretches back through the life forms and into the stars, back to the beginnings of the primeval fireball. This universe is a single multi-form energetic unfolding of matter, mind, intelligence, and life. And all of this is new...We are the first humans to look into the night sky and see the birth of stars, the birth of galaxies, the birth of the cosmos as a whole.<sup>1</sup>*

The recollection of how life has evolved before us and why provides insight and comfort to life today. As well as providing comfort and insight, though, history also provides challenge. History contains a disconcerting experience of timelessness. Or, better, we discover that the experience of time itself is a construct of the mind rather than of matter, a construct of imagination rather than of sensation. Indeed, Celtic spirituality, in which our Mercy story is rooted, suggests that looking back is not always an accurate description of the dynamic of history. Celtic spirituality contains a marvelous image for the timelessness of our creation story. According to Edward Sellner in *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*:

*In many ways Celtic Christians saw the larger truths of myth and the lasting effects of relationships of love standing outside of time... The early Celts...believed in 'thin places': geographical locations...where a person experiences only a very thin divide between past, present, and future times; places where a person is somehow able...to encounter a more ancient reality within present time; or places where perhaps only in a glance we are somehow transported into the future.<sup>2</sup>*

Celebrations, such as sesquicentennials, offer an opportunity to enjoy "thin places" in both time and place.

Let us, then, playfully yet carefully engage this moment with the hope of experiencing in the present our past and our future. Let us deliberately prepare our spirits for discovering that "deep and long-cherished affection for the weal of the Sisterhood" which unites past-present-and-future in a timeless unity of spirit.

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My delightful task is to share what I discovered listening to the women whose energy scattered the seed which grew into the congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. I will offer this composite family portrait in three sittings—the first will highlight personalities; the second, works; the third, spirituality. A fundamental question connects each of these and all of us: what features constitute the family line? What do I/we bring that is new? How/where do we reflect ancestral traits?

### Personalities

Some sixty-two individual women left seven different Mercy convents in Ireland and England between the years 1843 and 1892. Each in her own time and place headed West. The unremarkability of these first women of Mercy in the United States, the Caribbean, Central and Latin America may be their most remarkable characteristic. An observation made by Mother Mary Austin Carroll regarding Teresa Maher (Cincinnati) could have been applied to most of the sixty-two emigrants: “nothing extraordinary came into her experience....Performing uncommonly well the common duties of every day...she was a burning and a shining light to her associates.” This unremarkability, characteristic of the lives of many women in the nineteenth century, may be attributed as much to the criteria by which such judgments are made as to the actual quality of their presence and/or contribution to the world. The domestic sphere in which women’s lives were circumscribed yielded few monuments, slight prestige, and little political or economic power.

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## As we might expect, the composite portrait of these early women of Mercy constitutes a variety of physical features and psychological traits.

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As is true of so many of their contemporaries, the stories of these early Sisters of Mercy come to us through diaries, letters, and occasional news clippings. Their activities and projects, preserved in house chronicles and congregational archives, often omit individual names and/or biographical data. A rich collection of talents, energies, and personalities becomes visible only after careful analysis of the meager sources. My own remarks this morning rely primarily on *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*. Although I will make occasional reference to the wider circle of women, my focus will be on the women chosen to

lead each of the early “colonies”, (as the annals in Ireland often named the early groups). Time and energy—yours and mine—permit no more.

As we might expect, the composite portrait of these early women of Mercy constitutes a variety of physical features and psychological traits. Agnes O’Connor (New York) was described as “bright, pretty, and vivacious” while Josephine Cullen was remembered as “a cultured woman with genial manner.” Frances Warde (Pittsburgh) was thought “impatient and fiery by nature.” he chronicler in Teresa Maher’s regard may have condemned with faint praise: “not handsome in the face, [we read] her figure was large and graceful.” Winifred Furlong (Jamaica), slightly built with bright dark eyes and a very sweet smile, was energetic, “although her health was so delicate.” Agatha O’Brien possessed “a keen business sense and an appreciation for property values,” while Evangelista Fitzpatrick (Buenos Aires) and Teresa Maher receive special mention for their uprightness and strict observance of the rule.

Leave-taking for several of the early women was rendered more heroic by a natural aversion to the choice life presented them. While their spontaneous response to a call for volunteers may have been regretted by many who set sail for the “colonies,” Veronica McDarby has gifted us with a clear record that she yielded with grace to this difficult obedience. She was the only one of the first seven who did not volunteer for the work in America. Teresa Maher and Agnes O’Connor, also, were reluctant missionaries whose gift came from faith rather than a natural attraction to the call to leave familiar surroundings.

The ages of these early women varied greatly as well as their life-spans in service. Mary deSales Reddan was fifty-four years old when she sailed from Kinsale to San Francisco, the beloved and treasured companion of her twenty-five year old superior, Baptist Russell (San Francisco). Twenty-two year old Agnes O’Connor seems to have been the youngest superior, but Winifred Furlong, Frances Warde, and Teresa O’Farrell (Little Rock), all in their thirties, were hardly “mature women” by today’s standards. Evangelista Fitzpatrick, while thirty-four when she journeyed to Argentina in 1856, was fifty-eight years old when she led a Mercy foundation to Adelaide, Australia. Many of the sixty-two women were novices and postulants in their late teens and early twenties.

Their dying also was diverse. Agnes O’Connor died before her fiftieth birthday. Teresa Maher, at fifty-three, was just over that mark. Early members of several colonies—Philomenia Reid in Pittsburgh, Mary deSales Reddan in San Francisco, and Winifred Furlong in Jamaica—died within the first five years of their ministry in a new land. Others among those early women, of course, lived to celebrate golden and diamond jubilees among peoples now more familiar than faint memories of kinfolk in another land. Frances

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Warde, who died in her seventy-fifth year, was mourned by hundreds of men, women, and children in New England. The recording of the deaths of Teresa Perry (Middletown) and Agnes Healy (Meriden) in the chapter book of St. Xavier's Convent (Ennis) stands as silent tribute to seventy and eighty years of largely invisible labor.

The women chosen for leadership on these westward treks were not strangers to one another. Bonds of friendship formed in Ireland and England continued across vast distances and new friendships formed. Evangelista Fitzpatrick's fond memories of Agnes O'Connor with whom she shared the same formation experience in Dublin add to our understanding of the formidable New York foundress. Teresa Maher, at thirty, replaced Frances Bridgman as superior in Kinsale the year that Baptist Russell, at twenty-five, sailed to San Francisco. Later, Teresa would join her Kinsale companion in the missionary endeavor in the United States. Both remained devoted letter writers to their mentor, Frances Bridgman, through long years of service.

Archival records indicate much mobility among the early sisters and more meetings than we might suspect. The convent on Houfon Street in New York City often hosted traveling groups of Sisters of Mercy moving westward from Ireland or returning thence for recruitment or visitation. Agnes O'Connor and companions traveled to Providence to offer musical assistance for the celebration of a religious profession in that city. Mary Baptist Russell, enroute to Ireland, entertained the sisters in Cincinnati with tales of her early days on the West coast. Excursions to found new houses seem also to have been occasions for visitations along the route.

Correspondence between the early colonies and their parent-houses was frequent and warm. Correspondence among the colonies, typified by the famous interchange between Frances Warde and Baptist Russell over the pension school matter, often mixed business with pleasure. The pension school controversy exemplifies also the continued influence of personnel in Ireland and England on the emigrant women. Frances Bridgman was a major conversationalists in that particular interchange, advising Baptist Russell in her exploration of the issue.

Committed as they were to the grand Mercy enterprise, these emigrant women left Ireland and England reconciled to a permanent separation from kinfolk and homeland. The lament reflected in verse by a Kinsale chronicler may often have been figuratively, if not literally, spoken:

*Are we indeed to look our last?  
And must we bid farewell for ever?...  
Or wherefore seek a home beyond  
The home our early choice had given?*

In reality, however, several of them returned to Ireland and to England when their desire to bear the

harshness and burden of frontier circumstances proved stronger than their physical and psychological capacities. In addition, Teresa O'Farrell, Agnes O'Connor, Teresa Maher, Frances Warde, Baptist Russell and Evangelista Fitzpatrick returned to Ireland on business trips which included recruitment activities and family visits.

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## **. . . the works of Mercy in the United States, the Caribbean, Central and Latin America owe their beginnings to these sixty-two women.**

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Whatever their age, whatever their adornments of body or mind or heart, whatever their motives, the works of Mercy in the United States, the Caribbean, Central and Latin America owe their beginnings to these sixty-two women. A singular desire to be of service created among them a bond of sisterhood characterized in terms of human need. K. M. Barry, author of the first full-length biography of Catherine McAuley written by a person outside the congregation, wrote in 1894:

*No service that can lessen the burdens of adversity, redress the evils of savage life or the worst results of over-wrought civilization, is too arduous for the Sister of Mercy.*<sup>3</sup>

### **Works**

Catherine McAuley, in accounting for the beginnings of the Sisters of Mercy, stated that "it commenced with two, Sister Doyle and I."<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, that sense of a relational enterprise and mutual endeavor continued to mark the early congregation of Mercy. Clergy, appealing to Dublin for women to serve their faith communities, were readily referred to Carlow, Naas, Kinsale, or elsewhere. These foundations understood themselves to be parent-houses as well as Dublin. Nor was this sense of mutuality confined to an attitude among congregational leaders. Agnes O'Connor was already "on loan" from Dublin to Bermondsey when she received Bishop Hughes' request for help in the New York diocese. Earlier, mixed contingents of women from various Irish and English convents had nursed soldiers in the Crimean War.

In spite of the relational enterprise and mutuality, however, their endeavor was not an easy one. Shortly before her death in 1894, Frances Warde wrote in her journal:

*How full of joys and deep sorrows my life has been, none can tell....The memory of the past is*

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*filled with humbling reflections...My long and stormy life is at last coming to an end.*<sup>5</sup>

A companion of Mary Baptist Russell summarized her life with these words:

*Any little extra time of freedom she might chance to have was always devoted to helping or relieving the poor...She did many things in this way that others would not venture, and that were not always approved of...She was one of the most loving and generous souls I ever met.*<sup>6</sup>

Of Teresa Maher, Austin Carroll wrote:

*In her long and chequered religious life, Mother Teresa had been an example of fidelity and regularity...Our Lord who had tried [this] spouse in the crucible of sufferings and anxieties...allowed her...to experience the restful joy of a finished work.*<sup>7</sup>

While personal in their focus, these words offer a fair rendition of the story of the Sisters of Mercy—past, present, and future: “full of joys and deep sorrows,” “did many things...that others would not venture and that were not always approved,” “tried in the crucible of sufferings and anxieties”.

The “long and stormy”/“chequered” aspect of life seems almost inherent in the charismatic nature of religious life and the fact that the Sisters of Mercy represented a new form in that long tradition. While our early foremothers saw themselves as participants in that tradition of religious life which defined mission in relation to the personal and public nature of the vows and common life. As apostolic religious women, they consciously or unconsciously struggled to create a new experience in which vows and common life were shaped by mission. For the Sisters of Mercy, that mission was embedded in the works of Mercy exercised in the midst of and on behalf of the church. Largely Catholic Ireland greeted this effort with suspicion and dismay. An anti-Catholic atmosphere in the United States and Argentina and the more ecumenical cultures in the Caribbean and Central America, also greeted the efforts with suspicion, dismay, and, sometimes, violence.

In truth, the on-going struggle was both internal and external. The internal aspect revealed itself in questions of horarium, dress, and the appropriate definition of the works of Mercy in this time and place. The external aspect, seeking to establish appropriate relationships within the church and the world, revealed itself in matters of authority, mobility, and apostolic presence. Tensions between creativity and continuity, continuity and spontaneity characterized each of these aspects.

Winifred Furlong’s short history in Jamaica reflects both the internal and external nature of this struggle. The history of the Sisters of Mercy in

Jamaica began with Miss Jessie Ripoli and several pious ladies who wished to serve God in religion and spend their lives in the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. Bishop Gordon in 1890 succeeded in obtaining Sisters of Mercy to “receive and train the ladies who for some years have been carrying on the [orphanage].” The introduction of the Order into the local church, however, was not as easy as that reference suggests. Misunderstandings relative to the nature of the particular form of religious life into which these ladies would be trained seem to have been somewhat equally, yet differently, shared by Mother Winifred and Bishop Gordon. A letter written by Winifred Furlong one month before her death hints at a number of matters around which confusion and conflict reigned:

*Now dearest Mother, about the Bishop. You may think the Sisters have written strongly but I cannot hide his conduct from them any longer...[Our confessor] told me to write to you and ask if you would put our case before the Bishop who sent us out and ask him to threaten to recall us if he does not allow us to keep our rule and treat us as he ought...Regarding the Rule—he wants us to be constantly having entertainments. I object because the Sisters have only time for their prayers after their hard day’s teaching. He answers—‘You say too many prayers. Most of the convents in England have become secularized.’<sup>8</sup>*

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## **The works of Mercy in the United States, Argentina, the Caribbean, and Central and Latin America bore the markings of the works of Mercy in Ireland: service of the poor, sick, and ignorant.**

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Another letter in the same archives suggests that the critique of “too many prayers” may identify a circumstance similar to the early foundations of Bermondsey itself: an inability to yield monastic regularity in favor of apostolic practicality. Two years earlier, the Reverend Mother at the parent-house in Bermondsey received a letter from P. J. Chandley, S.J. in which he writes that “the Sisters in Jamaica are over-exerting themselves...I want you to send them an order not to allow their zeal to overstep prudence...They rise at 4 a.m. and I think they ought to be forbidden to get up before 5 a.m. They will do much more for God if they husband their strength...”

Some foundations anticipated such confusion over

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the Rule and attempted to provide protection from episcopal interference. The annals of the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale contain an entry for August 5, 1854, which alludes to such an attempt to clarify ahead of time the nature and purpose of the Order of Mercy:

*Care had been previously taken to have an engagement from Father [Hugh] Gallagher...that the Sisters should not be pressed to undertake any duties different from those to which they had bound themselves by profession; that no other interpretation of our Holy Rule should be imposed on them...that their support, etc., should be provided for independently of their own exertions, which by profession were due gratuitously to the poor.<sup>9</sup>*

Not only episcopal interference, however, occasioned adaptation and modification of the works of Mercy in these new lands among new peoples. This sense that the "exertions [of the sisters] were due gratuitously to the poor" caused Teresa O'Farrell much anguish of spirit in her early years in Arkansas. The resolution of her anguish exemplifies that adaptation and modification of the works of Mercy came in response to new lands and new peoples as well as episcopal interference.

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## **The breadth and depth of the works of Mercy exercised by these early women is astounding . . .**

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Mother Austin Carroll records in the *Annals* that "finding that their work lay so much among non-Catholics and the upper classes in general, Mother Teresa O'Farrell, in a visit to Ireland, laid the matter before Cardinal Cullen, bewailing...that there was so little scope for working among the poor in Arkansas." The *Annals* go on to record that the Cardinal, after consulting Rome, answered in favor of these works of Mercy. One suspects the Cardinal's response stemmed as much from a consideration of the pastoral needs of the local church as from a concern for the integrity of the Order of Mercy. Still he had ample precedent within the Order of Mercy itself for such a judgment. The works of Mercy in the United States, Argentina, the Caribbean, and Central and Latin America bore the markings of the works of Mercy in Ireland: service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. A marvelous spontaneity and adaptability, however, nuanced these works at every turn. Indeed, Frances Warde adamantly argued in the pension school controversy that the Congregations of Mercy could not exclude in principle any work of mercy unless it actually interfered with

the most characteristic works of the Institute. Perhaps she quoted the foundress herself in this regard: "We ought then have great confidence in God in the discharge of all these offices of Mercy, spiritual and corporal, which constitute the business of our lives."

That business among the early emigrant Mercy women was conducted in a variety of settings: urban and rural, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and non-Irish, poor and wealthy. Pittsburgh was an industrial city of 25,000 people in 1843. San Francisco, in 1854, was a gold-bust town of miners, sailors, and muddy streets. Cincinnati, nearly 200,000 two years after the sister's arrival, listed a population of 50,000 Catholics. On the other hand, the three hundred farmers traveling with the Sisters of Mercy from Naas to Little Rock constituted a good portion of that city's population, largely non-Catholic. Each setting shaped a particular nuance for the works of Mercy which freely developed in response to the needs of the local church. San Francisco's version of a house of Mercy sheltered, separately, single men and women, prostitutes and sailors. New York's educational endeavors included a lending library addressing the interests of Agnes O'Connor and the needs of young immigrant women. Cincinnati's adaptation of catechesis resulted in the building of a "free church" as well as free schools. Cultural and religious diversity marked educational efforts in Little Rock and Jamaica. The breadth and depth of the works of Mercy exercised by these early women is astounding: visitation of prisons, adult education, catechesis, homes for the aged, homes for working women, orphanages, vocational training centers, home health care, public and private education, publication of manuals and books, musical education, public and private hospitals. The scope of their travels and influence is equally astounding. The source of their energy and commitment deserves careful analysis and reflection.

### **Spirituality**

What vision and/or purpose sustained such energy among these pioneer women? A clue may be found in an early document of the Sisters of Mercy which proclaimed:

*The sisters of this Institute, founded and built on charity, should make this their favorite virtue, and they should study to maintain and cherish it among themselves so that it may be said that there is in them but one heart and one soul in God.<sup>10</sup>*

The sense of a common project, a common endeavor, shared with women in Ireland, in England, in Argentina, in Guiana, in the United States, in Jamaica created for our foremothers this "one heart and one soul in God." Such clarity of purpose impelled to greater generosity and responsiveness even as diversity of works and the anonymity of dis-

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tance challenged their bonds of sisterhood. Spirituality, after all, as one contemporary writer observes, "refers to my belief system raised to a lifestyle...to how I express belief and value in the choices I make in ordinary living."<sup>11</sup> Each person develops beliefs and values reflected in the choices of ordinary living and, similarly, groups/movements/associations develop beliefs and values reflected in the choices of ordinary living raised to a lifestyle. For the early emigrant women of Mercy, whatever the differences of personalities and talents, three values seem central to the choices they made: the importance of personal relationships, the centrality of mission, and the indispensability of common life. These three values were all of one piece, a pattern woven again and again into lives which pulse with the honest rhythms of human experience. Strong, personal relationships clearly sustained the purpose and zeal of these early women of Mercy, but even the most personal were valued in a clear context of mission and common life.

An amazing network of episcopal and clerical relationships, for instance, at one and the same time, occasioned early calls to service, provided the strongest resistance to response and innovation, and contributed the most moving eulogies and testimonials. Monsignor Fahy in Argentina, Bishop O'Connor in Pittsburgh, Bishop Hughes in New York, Archbishop Alemany in California, Father William McDonald in New Hampshire represent a much longer list of such persons in the history of the Sisters of Mercy. The beautiful story of Teresa O'Farrell and Archbishop Byrne begins with a promise which speaks to nurturing the common life of the church and ends with an exercise of one of the most enduring of the corporal works of Mercy. It was a circumstance often repeated. When asked as a young superior in 1850 what conditions she made on her coming to the States, Teresa O'Farrell's response was simple: "that you will never leave us without Mass or the Sacraments. Bishop Byrne fulfilled his promise to do so in circumstances often designed to defeat his intent. In his final illness during the height of the Civil War, the Sisters took him into their home and their care. Nineteen years later when his episcopal brethren gathered to perform the final rites in appropriate splendor, one of them removed the episcopal ring from Bishop Byrne's finger and presented it to Teresa O'Farrell who, as the *Annals* record, "had crossed the Atlantic at the bidding of the wearer thirty years before."<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Frances Warde's long and rich friendship with William McDonald centered on the service of a church they both loved. They seemed to understand one another's unusual temperaments and apostolic commitment. Father McDonald kept unpleasant clerical observations from her as often as possible and she, in turn, supported him against the criticism of the sisters.

Nor were these enduring relationships confined to

members of the clergy or congregation. Emily Harper of Baltimore, granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, seems to have been life-long benefactor of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States and personal friend of several of them. The Harpers purchased land and a small cottage which became the first Convent of Mercy in Newport, Rhode Island. In addition, various chronicles record the visits of Frances Warde, Mary Austin Horan, and Mary Vincent Haire to the Harper residence in Newport for rest and relaxation.

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## **My sisters, "with this as our heritage—what may we not justly hope?"**

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Colleagues in ministry and beneficiaries of ministry seem to have equally shared this relational quality and to have participated in the works of Mercy according to their means and talents. Quietly and routinely, newspaper boys, school children, prisoners, prostitutes, patients, medical personnel, found themselves embraced with compassion, challenged to personal development, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. The faith of the recipient did not matter, nor the social standing, nor the cultural background. Clearly, however, these women who walked with them were women of faith sustained in a sisterhood of service. The story of Veronica McDarby perhaps best illustrates the remarkable unremarkability of such faith and sisterhood. For forty years, Veronica McDarby opened the door to the needy at Penn Street and Webster Avenue in Pittsburgh. The poor who called at the convent for relief were recipients of her special care as were the young girls who were employed to assist her. To these children, we are told, she gave a mother's care, instructing them in piety while she trained them in habits of industry. Her Irish charm and her kindly manner gave joy to all who pulled the convent bell.<sup>13</sup>

And what of today? How goes the "weal of sisterhood" envisioned by Elizabeth Strange in 1843? Are we recognizable descendants of our foremothers? To test my hope that we are, I reviewed death notices sent from the motherhouses of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas during the months of April and May. I wanted to experience for myself the resonance...to create a "thin place" where I could know the meeting of past-present-future in a timeless unity of spirit. The stories reflect the common humanity we share and certain ancestral traits I attribute to the common life of Mercy. Listen to the stories as I read them...do you hear an echo in the room?



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*(Mary Majella Genrick - Chicago)...78 years old...gifted with musical talent...generously shared with her sisters...she and her dear friend, Leona Heenan, RSM, died within three weeks of one another...*

*(Mary Valerian McGraw - Rochester)...76 years old...maternity nurse...nursing school director...sacristan...friend...personable, competent, compassionate...*

*(Mary Madeline Strang - Providence)...age omitted...left her native Newfoundland and found her way to Rhode Island...she was a Martha and not a Mary...had to be moving all the time...cleaning, sewing...whatever needed to be done...a loving, caring friend...*

*(Mary Mercedes Dwyer - Burlingame)...99 years old...nicknamed "Cindy" in the community...spent her fifty-three years of active ministry in domestic duties... [recollections] brought out her great kindness and compassion to all, many recalling the treats received from her...*

*(Mary Estelle Murphy - Buffalo)...86 years old...tiny, gentle, unassuming...garnered countless sister-friends and kept them friends for always...she was her own strong person...belying her apparent fragility...her self-effacing shyness...tapped for unsought offices as principal and superior...*

*(Mary Ruth Gorman - Detroit)...92 years old...labored in hospitals staffed and conducted by the Sisters of Mercy...in retirement, she continued working as driver and receptionist...at thirty-nine, entered the community from the workforce...[served] with ability, grace, and charm...*

*(Emilie King - Dallas)...89 years old...worked in the Gettysburg Theater before she entered the community, played the piano for silent movies...had a kind heart and was generous with her time and talent...loved children and music...made certain that [the children] knew they were loved...*

*(Ellen Lawlor - Albany)...70 years old...enjoyed gardening...was a good businesswoman...she ran the equivalent of a city and did it with great effectiveness and humility...boundless energy...an acute sense of humor...with all that she was a friend...she valued her faith life and her vocation...*

My sisters, "with this as our heritage—what may we not justly hope?"

#### Footnotes

1. Brian Swimme, *The Universe as a Green Dragon* (Sante Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company, 1985), p. 28-29.
2. Edward Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Marie Press, 1993), p. 25.
3. Quotation found in *Documentary Study for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God, Catherine McAuley* by Angela Bolster, R.S.M. (Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Prot. No. 1296: Rome, 1985), p. 851.
4. Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M., editor, *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1969), p. 154.
5. Kathleen Healy, *Frances Warde: American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 437 and 484.
6. Kathleen Healy, editor, *Sisters of Mercy, Spirituality in America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 363.
7. Mary Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, Vol. IV, (New York: P. O'Shea, Publisher, 1895), p. 308.
8. Taken from the transcript of a letter in the Bermondsey archives. The letter, dated October 31st, 1893, was written by Mother Winifred Furlong to the Reverend Mother in Bermondsey.
9. Excerpt from the Annals of the Convent of Mercy (Kinsale). The entry was dated August 5, 1854.
10. *Constitutions of the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Sisters of Mercy General Motherhouse, 1955), Article #160.
11. Definition taken from an unpublished paper written by Jean Steffes, CSA.
12. Carroll, *Ibid.*, p. 372.
13. I am indebted in the retelling of this story to the work of Sheila Carney, RSM, in presenting the seven founding sisters of Pittsburgh at the anniversary Mass celebrated on December 21, 1993.

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# The Ecclesial Context: A Look in the Rearview Mirror

Patricia McCann, R.S.M.

*(This text is an abridgment of the address delivered by the author at the Sesquicentennial Celebration in Pittsburgh)*

It is a thrill to be here to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the sisters of Mercy in the United States. I have enjoyed life with the Sisters of Mercy for thirty-nine years. As we used to say in pre-Institute days, I am a Pittsburgh Sister of Mercy. I grew up in this community with the wonderful chauvinism of the Pittsburgh Sisters as the "first Sisters of Mercy in the United States." That was a healthy energy source in my youth. Over the years it became home. More recently the experience of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas broadened my sense of Mercy considerably. As I traveled around the Institute these past three years, I came to appreciate deeply the big world of Mercy that surrounds us. I have seen and learned of wonderful ministry being done across the United States, in Central and South America, in the Caribbean, Guam and the Philippines, as well as in the vast network of Mercy that extends beyond the Institute. I feel happy and proud to be connected with all of this.

I want to look at two things with you in the time that we have together. First: What was the United States Catholic experience into which Frances Warde and her companions came in 1843? What was the culture of the time? What was the particular Roman Catholic milieu? What was the Pittsburgh scene in 1843? Secondly, what were some of the implications of that experience for them and for us? How did it challenge and shape them? What might they say to us today?

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**"Objects seen in the mirror  
are closer  
than they appear."**

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The title of this presentation came to me from that little warning printed on the rearview mirrors of autos: "Objects seen in the mirror are closer than they appear." It is a warning not to misinterpret what one is seeing as if it were far behind. This warning is good for us when we are reflecting on the 19th or 20th century. It may be history, but it is not altogether past. The events, attitudes, and experiences of those times are still present in us, even though we are not always aware of it. So let us take a look in the rearview mirror together, keeping in mind that we are driving in the now.

What was the mid-nineteenth century culture of the United States into which the first seven Sisters came? You recall from your study of history that this was the eve of the Industrial Revolution, and about twenty years before the Civil War. It was a period of the growth of nationhood. During the 1840's anti-Catholicism was particularly strong in the United States. The textbooks term this phenomenon nativism, describing it as a xenophobic reaction to the waves of new immigrants, a large number of whom were Roman Catholic. We might recognize a certain similarity to the anti-immigrant sentiments we see expressed almost daily on the evening news. Nativism was fear based. In mid-nineteenth century the fear was a carry over from the Reformation era. The nativists' question was, "Will these authority-loving papists take away our cherished freedoms?" It also had economic roots; "Will there be enough work for everyone?" Overt manifestation of these sentiments occurred in frequent church and convent burnings in the cities of the Northeast, in regular street riots between the nativists and the immigrants. Store windows carried employment appeals with the parenthesis, "No Irish need apply." A Harrisburg, Pennsylvania newspaper printed a call for soldiers to serve in the Mexican-American War, but emphasized that Catholics would not be accepted for the regiment so great was the fear of allowing arms in the hands of the immigrants.<sup>1</sup> When the Vatican, along with many of the monarchs of Europe, sent a granite block as a gift for the construction of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital the nativists stole the block and dumped it in the Potomac River where it presumably remains to this day. As these stories illustrate, one could hardly exaggerate the widespread anti-Catholic bigotry of this period.

In 1844 the Native American Political Party convention met in Pittsburgh.<sup>2</sup> The platform contained three key elements: 1) One must have been born in the United States to run for president; 2) No Roman Catholic could ever be president; 3) Twenty years of residence was required before one could apply for naturalization papers. The Native Americans were also eager to promote the use of the King James Bible as the basic text for reading and spelling lessons in the common schools.<sup>3</sup> We twentieth century persons who know U.S. culture as secular/pluralist might have a hard time imagining the degree to which the nineteenth century cultural climate was identified as a "Protestant nation." It was a post-Reformation milieu, intentionally Protestant in an era that was pre-ecu-

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menism, pre-secular. The two overwhelming fears of the nineteenth century Protestant majority were Catholicism and secularism. The sectarian nature of the common schools was intended. Texts like the McGuffey's *Reader* and Woodbridge's *Geography* were unapologetically anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic.<sup>4</sup> In the penal laws mentality which carried over from England and Europe, the Catholic church represented a feared and/or despised minority, a fact which the growing waves of Irish, German, Italian, Central European, etc., migrations only deepened in the middle and late nineteenth century.

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## **Despite the hostile cultural climate, the Catholic Church in the United States in 1843 was a vigorous, rapidly growing, dynamic institution.**

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And what of the Catholic environment into which Frances and her companions came? Despite the hostile cultural climate, the Catholic Church in the United States in 1843 was a vigorous, rapidly growing, dynamic institution. In preparation for this reflection with you I dug out my old beat up copy of Peter Guilday's *National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy* and read again the Pastoral Letter of the Fifth Provincial Council of Baltimore which met May 13, 1843.<sup>5</sup> Some things struck me which had not before, and which are interesting in light of our Mercy history. Sixteen bishops attended the Fifth Provincial Council from the following places: Baltimore, Boston, Mobile, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Louisville, New Orleans, Dubuque, Nashville, New York, Vincennes, Natchez, Richmond, Detroit, St. Louis and Charleston, S.C. All but two of these are centers of Mercy life in the United States!

The pastoral letter is not the voice of a besieged institution. In fact, it hardly addresses nativism directly at all. It expresses concern about the immigrants being forced to attend Protestant services to keep their jobs. It raises concern about the effect of the common schools on immigrant youth, and calls for good catechetical education. It warns of the dangers of the secret societies, the Masonic groups. The bulk of the document is devoted to pastoral and spiritual concerns: the claims of charity upon us, intemperance and its evils, the problem of divorce, church authority, the support of the Indian and Liberian missions, support of Catholic institutions, and a concluding expression of gratitude for the Oxford Movement. Six years and two councils later, ten additional bishops were present and it is again interesting to note the places from

which they came: St. Paul, Galveston, Albany, Cleveland, Buffalo, Little Rock, Chicago, Hartford, Milwaukee and Pittsburgh.

The Catholic community at this mid-century point was made up largely of urban immigrant poor. They had come in search of more secure economic life—a motive which would not earn them asylum here today. They became miners, millworkers, railroaders, and low-level civil servants, especially policemen. They were at the bottom of the economic ladder. The church which they established here was paternalist, but benevolently so as it ministered by helping them to enter American life. It was a natural climate for “service to the poor, sick, and ignorant” to which Sisters of Mercy were vowed.

Ironically, the church enjoyed this “fresh air of democracy” as John Carroll had termed it even as it experienced the nativist reality. In contrast with Europe where the church experienced no freedom in the Reformation countries, and limited freedom under the crown in Catholic countries, the atmosphere of separation of church and state in the United States seemed to provide a good climate for it to grow. The Pittsburgh diocese was established in 1843, and Michael O'Connor became its first bishop in exactly this milieu of nativism, xenophobia, optimism and liberty of an earlier period. The immediate concern of the new bishop in this “western outpost” was to address the pastoral realities of establishing a diocese. He needed personnel, priests and religious; hence, the visit to Carlow, Ireland to recruit Sisters of Mercy. Education for the immigrant children was one of his priorities as he saw in it an essential means toward combatting nativism and gaining acceptance for the Roman Catholics here. There are some wonderful stories in the archives of the Pittsburgh Mercy community and of the diocese from this time period. For example, there was a newspaper widely circulated in Pittsburgh entitled *The Presbyterian Advocate* which published articles about the Bishop's intention to bring Sisters of Mercy to Pittsburgh to run a hospital so that they could get Protestants on their deathbeds and convert them.<sup>6</sup> There is also the story of the election of Joseph Barker as mayor of the city in 1850. Mr. Barker was not a candidate, but was elected on a write-in ballot while he was in jail serving a sentence for vilification of Bishop O'Connor's character in his street-preaching.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-five years later the problem for the church in Pittsburgh would be national conflicts among Catholics of different immigrant background, but in 1843 it was one of assimilation-acceptance of the Catholics by the Scotch Presbyterian leadership of Pittsburgh.

In this young and vigorous Catholic Church in the United States at mid-century, church leaders and religious became major players in the process of assimilation of the immigrants, especially through parish and educational institutions. Assimilation dominated the

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concerns of the hierarchy in the second half of the century. One thinks of leaders like James Cardinal Gibbons, John Ireland, and John Lancaster Spalding who sought to mainstream Catholic immigrants. They typically did so with little care for the preservation of ethnic expressions of local churches—a stance later regretted, perhaps. These leaders embraced the American cultural climate as good for the church.

This is a legacy of the nineteenth century which reaches directly into our twentieth century lives. Did the church achieve assimilation of its immigrant population so effectively that it created a new dilemma: an ecclesial identity rooted more in Americanism than in Catholicism? This question poses a complex meditation for us today.

The week before last there was an article in the Sunday magazine section of the *Washington Post* (June 10, 1994), about a fan of Rush Limbaugh—a Dittohead as they are called—and it described this man as a “devout Catholic.” This puzzled me a great deal. How can a person with Catholic immigrant heritage be a devotee of someone who is so virulently anti-immigrant in his politics and attitudes? And how can a person raised on Catholic social teaching possibly be a Limbaugh fan, let alone a Dittohead? Does the assimilationist legacy explain our complicated efforts to articulate Catholic identity in the church in the United States?

So much for the look in the rearview mirror. It is already drawing us into the twentieth century. What might these first seven Sisters say to us today as we celebrate 150 years of the heritage which they built for us? I think that the first thing they would say is this: “Be careful not to romanticize us.” They would not want us to fall into the trap of thinking that they enjoyed any clearer vision about mission and the future than we do. Their role in church and society was perhaps more clearly defined than ours, but certainly not easier. Women had a very limited role in 19th century Ireland regarding education and opportunity. Mercy archives are full of letters that illustrate the conflict with clergy and tension with bishops with whom Sisters dealt in an era when bishops (and clergy) exercised more authority over the inner workings of religious life than they do now. Fortunately, our archives are also full of letters that validate the wonderful friendships and support from bishops and clergy which we have enjoyed over the decades. As it is for us today, relationship within the church was a mixed blessing for our forebears. Those first seven Sisters came here with nothing—no investments or community resources to provide them income; no motherhouses or convents to shelter them; no hospitals or health plans or infirmaries to care for them; no retirement funds to secure their old age. Nothing. They brought only an outrageous hope and a commitment to mission. Theirs was the hope that is a theological virtue, a gift from God. It was the hope that is an essential

Catholic stance grounded only in faith. Perhaps the second thing they would say to us is this: “Live in that outrageous hope yourselves. Reclaim your Catholicity.”

I believe that a major challenge to us contemporary women religious—in fact the most radical challenge we face—is to reclaim our Catholicity, both with a capital C and a small c. The dilemma of today is to define our relationship within the church and through it to the suffering poor of humanity. I am not referring to retrenchment here, nor a return to pre-Vatican II theology or ecclesiology. Nor am I urging a return to the protective cloister of pre-renewal religious life, or some kind of falsified imitation of our foundresses. I am painfully aware of the conflict of living within the church at a time when it is so visibly limited in its ability to be inclusive of women. If what we see in the rearview mirror is still true for us, our future is inextricably linked to our groundedness in Catholic tradition. I say this in full awareness of the complexity of pluralism, feminism, internationalism, secularism—all those elements that make up our modern environment. I also say it in full awareness of the complexity of the contemporary church. In fact, I want to situate Catholic identity squarely in the middle of that complexity.

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## **The church is a major arena in which we work out the struggles of human limitedness, both individually and institutionally.**

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We are Catholic religious. It is the legacy of Catherine McAuley, Frances Warde and all of the Mercy-founding women. It is our grace-gifted chosen faith community. It gives the fundamental context for our lives, ministry, worship, prayer and world view. The church is a major arena in which we work out the struggles of human limitedness, both individually and institutionally. It is a place where rich and poor stand together as equals assuming a responsibility in conscience to bridge that gap.

What does it mean to say that we are Catholic with a capital C? Theologian Martin Marty described it so well at the Catholic Health Association conference in Philadelphia in mid-June of 1994: To be Catholic is to be rooted in mission, to think of our whole life as a call. It means to have a sacramental view of reality—awe, discovery, care. It means to be attentive to human dignity, to be alert to the quest for meaning, and to respond to the community as church becoming a people; to hear the call of justice. The Catholic tradition is wholistic, expansive, liberating.

And what does it mean to say that we are catholic with a small c? Catholicity in this sense means universality, availability, openness. It calls us to be at home in the streets of the world; it is the voice of our Institute Direction Statement inviting us to the economically poor, to the oppressed, and to our international, multi-cultural reality. It focuses our contemporary commitment to the poor, sick and ignorant. Like the founding women whom we celebrate these days, we are called by our Catholicity/catholicity to "get on the boats" and go wherever they take us, whether we do that spiritually from the confines of a wheelchair or actually in our lives and ministry.

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, editor of *Commonweal*, had a wonderful article in the May, 1994 *U.S. Catholic* entitled "Why Belong to an All-Too-Human-and-Fallible Church?"<sup>8</sup> She cited a metaphor of Henri de Lubac in describing the ambivalence we often feel about church. De Lubac noted that on the one hand the church is "a ship full of unruly passengers always on the verge of wrecking it," and on the other "that mystery par excellence which lays hold of and surrounds us—through which we are made blessed." Perhaps this is the ecclesial point where our lives connect with our founding women. I think that de Lubac's metaphors would have seemed as real to them as to us despite the very different historical and ecclesial context. Again, I think that they would say to us: "Don't romanticize us. Live in the outrageous hope yourselves. Reclaim your Catholicity."

Thinking of the founding women whom we are

celebrating this week I am convinced that we come from strong stock—roots well grounded. These were mission-driven women. They met the challenges of their times head-on, despite suffering from all of the same human limitations which afflict us. We immerse ourselves in their stories these days not to wallow in sentiment, but because they can give us courage. The same faith and outrageous hope which animated and impelled them have the potential to liberate us to do what we have to do. Please God, there will be someone, somewhere, 150 years from now who can celebrate the fact that we took courage and renewed their legacy.

#### Footnotes

1. *Pittsburgh Catholic*, January 15, 1848, p. 349, col. 1-2.
2. Anon., "Anti-Catholic Movements in the United States," *The Catholic World*, XXII (March, 1876), pp. 810-822.
3. *Presbyterian Advocate*, August 28, 1844, p. 1., col. 5, & June 9, 1887, p. 4, col. 3.
4. William C. Woodbridge, *Rudiments of Geography*, cited in P.R. McDevitt, "How Bigotry Was Kept Alive," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, (Sept. 1913), p. 260.
5. Peter Guilday, *National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy*, Newman Press, 1954.
6. *Pittsburgh Catholic*, Dec. 19, 1846, p. 16, col. 3.
7. *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 9, 1880, p. 2, col. 1.
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# Mother Austin Carroll

Mary Hermenia Muldrey, R.S.M.

One hundred fifty years ago, Catherine McAuley's Hous of Mercy on Baggot Street had already witnessed 17 years of constant activity on behalf of the poor. In 1844, three years after the foundress' death, the Sisters of Mercy continued her work in Ireland and abroad.<sup>1</sup>

Of the two dozen Mercy convents founded 150 years ago, 16 were in Ireland, but none were in Lommel, where Margaret Anne Carroll, later Sr. M. Austin Carroll, attended school. Margaret may not have heard of Catherine McAuley at that time, for Clonmel, although Ireland's largest inland town, was 100 miles from Dublin along a series of post roads that had made Catherine's journeys lengthy. Yet coincidence arranged that Catherine's Institute and the Carroll family grew almost simultaneously.

In 1829 William Carroll had married Margaret Strahan of Waterford. Two years later the couple's first son, John, was born, followed by Margaret in 1835. In the ensuing years, three boys and four girls completed the family.

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**... the success of Josephine's administration was due to the fact that she took time for counsel, reflection and prayer before any decision of consequence.**

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In Dublin Catherine's Institute grew in those years from a group of lay volunteers in 1829, to Catherine's profession of vows in 1831, and the beginning of a religious community, to the foundation of a dozen religious communities between 1835 and 1841. As Margaret Carroll reached her teens, Mercy convents flourished in Carlow, Cappoquin, Cork, and Charleville. The "walking nuns" caught Margaret's attention, and Catherine caught her heart. Margaret made a retreat in Cappoquin and visited the Mercy convent in Cork in 1852. Her parents proudly accepted Margaret's decision to enter St. Maries of the Isle in Cork. There Mother Josephine Warde accepted her as a candidate in 1853, gave her the Mercy habit and the name Mary Austin in 1854, and received her religious vows in 1856. Shining bright and clear twenty-five years later in Austin's *Annals* was her gratitude for a happy novitiate and the wonderful introduction to the Mercy Institute which she had received from Josephine.<sup>2</sup>

Austin described her instructor as a strict disciplinarian who enforced the rules with kindness, but whose sense of humor enjoyed a witty quip enough to pardon a delinquent who had one handy. In the *Annals* Austin gave special mention to Josephine's keen appreciation of abilities in her sisters and her wisdom in assigning sisters to tasks that needed their talents.<sup>3</sup> She believed that the success of Josephine's administration was due to the fact that she took time for counsel, reflection and prayer before any decision of consequence.

Like Frances Xavier Warde in New England, the poor of Cork had received the benefit of Josephine's generosity. That virtue had transferred many a candidate from Cork to America. In 1856 Frances Xavier "wrote a touching letter begging" her sister to send "a few professed sisters" to Providence, R.I.<sup>4</sup> After prayerful reflection Josephine chose two, Francis Meade and newly professed Austin Carroll. Xavier already knew the older sister, and the younger was introduced as "fully capable of doing any duty in the Order...and of a lively and amiable disposition."<sup>5</sup> And it was as an enthusiastic volunteer for the American missions that MaryAustin bade farewell to family and community, especially her favorite sister Katie, who was a canonical novice in Cork at the time.

Mary Austin worked eight years in the many assignments given her by Josephine's sister Frances. Austin knew her as Reverend Mother Xavier Warde, and she successfully utilized Austin's abilities in one assignment after another. Frances had her train young Mercy teachers in Providence, replace an expert French teacher in Hartford, and assist in establishing Mercies in Rochester, Buffalo and the frontier town of Omaha. Manchester was different, for Xavier had gone there with just a few sisters. She was surprised to see the size of the buildings to which she had fallen heir when another congregation was unable to keep its commitment.<sup>6</sup> Immediately she sent urgent requests for help to Austin and other teachers whom she had previously assigned elsewhere. Thus she rapidly increased the staff for the fine new school when those she called answered her bidding.

In Manchester Frances Xavier assigned Austin to the extra-curricular activity of gathering evidence on the life of Catherine. This labor of love certainly called for massive correspondence as Austin collected reminiscences from Catherine. Frances Warde might have been happy and proud later that Austin's assignment had spread news of Catherine worldwide, but making foundations had priority, and Austin was needed in Omaha. With her manuscript crying for a publisher, Austin Carroll transferred to St. Louis and completed publication. Her *Life of Catherine McAuley* filled

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500 pages and ran to 12 additional editions and reprints. Mercys can be forever mindful that Austin saved such bits and pieces as Cottage Controversy that might otherwise have been completely lost.<sup>7</sup>

One of the graces of Austin's first ten years in the Mercy community was the opportunity of serving under two superiors who had been friends of Catherine McAuley. For her last forty years Austin herself became Mercy guide and leader in the deep South. There, certainly influenced by the example of Catherine's friends, she led countless women either to give or to receive compassionate assistance. Regina Wertz, R.S.M., described Austin in her video as "doing mercy and inspiring others to do likewise."<sup>8</sup> Before taking this or any quality to treat today, I asked some insightful Mercys to select a characteristic of Austin's that impressed them or gave them hope.

Several sisters pointed out Austin's relations with co-workers. The way that Austin worked in close collaboration with lay helpers seemed to be what Maureen Crossen termed the Mercy knack of "stretching the convention while remaining faithful to it."<sup>9</sup> When the first fever epidemic cut the New Orleans community in half, Austin worked with the assistance of a group of mature women. Each lay woman became the partner of a sister for the visitation of the sick, thus doubling the number of poor patients who could be given help. Though the fever abated, the friendships continued and the sisters still needed assistance.

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## **... she used Catherine's words when describing daily Mercy life as "going hand in hand with" Christ.**

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At this point Austin decided to inaugurate a temporary program for live-in volunteers. She invited their epidemic partners to become regular assistants—living, praying and serving in the works of mercy for as many months as they decided to continue. Within two years a dozen women chose the program, tried out for six months, then dropped out or chose to be received as Mercy assistants. Nine were received, five for terms from two to six years, and the rest chose to remain until God called them twenty or thirty years later.<sup>10</sup> Wonderfully generous, these assistants helped with the care of the orphans and the tots in the free daycare and continued with their original service as partners on sick calls. This program sustained the community in its need, but ceased because of a rapid increase in candidates for the vowed life of the Mercy Institute.

Many of these younger applicants were the prized graduates of Mercy teachers or had been working as

lay teachers with Austin in the parish schools. In fact, the spark that lit the fire of emulation repeatedly fell upon those who had been working closely with Austin as teacher or student. In five different years in New Orleans Austin accepted between ten and thirteen candidates. Her sisters recalled how frequently she used Catherine's words when describing daily Mercy life as "going hand in hand with" Christ.<sup>11</sup> Yet actions, not words, gave Austin the Pied Piper quality that caught the attention of two of the sisters I consulted.

That Austin never seemed to notice any connection between her enthusiasm in spending herself for others and the rapid increase in candidates was noted also. Austin herself attributed the sudden influx to the dedication of all the sisters who willingly took the risk of nursing in lethal epidemics as well as to the charity of those who gave their lives. Looking upon the fever martyrs as the grains of wheat that seeded the fertile delta soil, Austin saw as their harvest the witnesses who became Mercy applicants. These women were inspired by Christ's message of "no greater love" because they had seen its realization. In his invitation to the sisters Archbishop Jean Marie Odin had promised that New Orleans would be a "vast field" for their ministry, and a New Orleans pastor seeking Irish Mercys for St. Patrick's a decade earlier had said the sisters would harvest a most luxuriant and abundant crop.<sup>12</sup> Both were right.

Another consultant was deeply impressed with the youth of Austin and other Mercy leaders who demonstrated both wisdom and maturity. Such sisters often arrived on this continent in their early twenties, and were sent to establish foundations at or about thirty. Considering the hardships that many such groups faced, youthful energy and resiliency were probably essential to the success of many foundation situations. Leaders often had a founding community composed of a sickly assistant, a novice, a doubtful aspirant, an elderly lay sister, and possibly a lay postulant. Then newspapers carried the news that six Sisters of Mercy had arrived to staff day school, academy and industrial classes immediately, but that it would be several days before piano lessons and an orphanage could be started.

Much more important than youth for Austin and contemporary founders was Catherine's youthful spirit of openness and adaptability. This spirit gave the leaders courage to take unconventional pathways in their new circumstances, as Agnes O'Connor welcomed Kitty Seton to the Mercy novitiate in her fiftieth year and Juliana Hardman formed a lay group in Handsforth to assist with her House of Mercy, as Austin was to do a decade later.<sup>13</sup> Austin also met a new situation when the Gulf Coast bishops, who sought Mercys for small parish schools, explained that the small towns along the sandy beaches had too few Catholic families with enough dollars and daughters to sustain a foundation.

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Recent reflections by Celeste Rouleau on appropriate works of mercy "for our times" as establishing, "mothering and nurturing a new creation," concern a time quite different from Catherine's.<sup>14</sup> Austin's challenge in this case was to spread the compassionate works of Catherine to locations and situations very different from Northern industrial cities, each with its own Mercy foundation. Like New York and San Francisco, New Orleans had its share of the problems common to any port, but there, a busy motherhouse could sponsor many works. Austin decided to stretch the usual distance between motherhouse and branch so as to spread the works of mercy along the Gulf Coast from New Orleans to Apalachicola, Florida.

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**Her decision to work against the odds to establish schools for blacks was probably fueled by her knowledge of educational deprivation thrust upon Irish Catholics like her grandparents.**

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Several sister consultants focused on Austin's establishment of black schools as a hopeful sign, even in later periods of racial tension. When the Mercys arrived in New Orleans, black children attended public schools. Girls were served by an academy established by the Holy Family Sisters twenty-five years earlier. The Mercys prepared black children for the sacraments and worked with a black sodality. However, when Austin visited several coastal towns in 1873, she found no black schools. Her decision to work against the odds to establish schools for blacks was probably fueled by her knowledge of educational deprivation thrust upon Irish Catholics like her grandparents. Austin had the determination, but she would also need every ounce of her energy and tact to make the schools a reality.

Black mothers had to be coaxed in the midst of post-war poverty and devastation to allow their youngsters to relinquish jobs that contributed to the sustenance of the family. To win convent neighbors to agreement Austin used her persuasive Irish charm and promised that there would be no racial incident. To foil Klan racists who tried to burn every black school that opened, Austin placed her schools so close to the sisters' residence that one of the Mercys described them as leaning against the convent. Not one of Austin's twelve black schools was ever torched, and after a year or so, it was usually safe to rent a non-adjacent house that proved a better facility or a more

convenient location.

Another challenge for Austin and her teachers was to make the school day interesting enough to win to regular attendance these youngsters of varied ages who were strangers to desks, classrooms and the discipline of study. Austin's creativity nudged her to appeal to the innate musical talent of the children. When her teachers used short music breaks between classes for basic subjects, attendance increased dramatically. The interludes of music from recreational songs to religious spirituals made school entertaining, but also challenged reluctant pupils to learn new songs and perform for others. As a bonus, according to the teachers, rhythmic intermissions seemed to have increased both self esteem and confidence, attention spans and the rate of improvement in the children.

The dozen schools for black children staffed by New Orleans Mercys, like Austin's daycare for preschoolers and the homes for orphans and newsboys, were never self-supporting. Close to bankruptcy at the time, many bishops and pastors feared the loss of their parishioners. Austin had to convince them of two things, that the black schools would not affect the safety of their people and that she had all the funds she would need for a successful project. With New Orleans still under martial law throughout most of the 1870's, money was a rare commodity. Upon the shoulders of Mother Austin Carroll, however, had fallen Catherine McAuley's mantle of dependence upon God's providence.

Accepted by Austin almost as part of her Irish heritage was her absolute confidence that God would provide. This shone with special clarity in an exchange of letters with Bishop William Henry Elder of Natchez when she wrote him about her plans to open a black school in Biloxi. He replied immediately that he had no money for that endeavor. Austin's answer might have shocked this rather staid bishop as she explained that she felt certain that God would sustain any such work of mercy that she established.

How they are to be supported never bothers me—like most of my country people I do the thing first and...God has always helped us and sent means enough to keep our institutions going. God is bound to help me when the work is one of incessant labor and is undertaken solely for His sake. If I opened a dancing school or a saloon, I could not look for help from God. But He must help what is done solely for His honor. Though bound only for this district, I do not want God to be offended anywhere if I can help it. And I consider that a soul is the same to Him whether in Northern Louisiana or Southern Mississippi. People tell me differently. I listen, but follow the instincts of my faith...and trust in God.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, Austin relied "with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God," as Catherine would word it.<sup>16</sup> Yet New Orleans Mercys gathered funds with the usual fairs, lectures and raffles, as well as

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unusual activities. These included making attractive banners for Sodalists in processions and Hibernians in parades. Lovely Mercy shrouds became sought-after specialities. Literary publications were Austin's best fundraisers. Many turned into local best sellers. By 1894, Austin had authored eight books, translated or edited eight more. In the latter group were U.S. reprints of Catherine's Cottage Controversy and Clare Moore's Practical Sayings, Advices and Prayers...of Catherine McAuley.<sup>17</sup> As these were no longer available abroad, Austin had them reprinted for the sisters in New Orleans in order to spread knowledge of Catherine McAuley.

Besides the books, Austin frequently had articles accepted by such professional journals as the American Catholic Quarterly Review of Philadelphia and the Jesuit Irish Monthly of Dublin.<sup>18</sup> Austin had learned that payment from the periodicals arrived much more promptly than publishers' book dividends. After lengthy and widespread research, I determined that more than three dozen articles were located in various journals and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps twice that many saw print and may surface in the future. The articles were a steady source of funds to feed the orphans, clothe the newsboys and sustain other charitable works of the community. Austin's dozen black schools were largely maintained by her pen for forty years before 1915.

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## Like Catherine before her, Austin Carroll seems to have possessed an extraordinary confidence in God's providence . . .

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Even before Mother Katharine Drexel's sisters came to New Orleans in 1915,<sup>19</sup> numerous schools of the black Holy Family Sisters had been in existence for fifty-five years.<sup>20</sup> Mother Drexel was able to strengthen projects already well-established and to increase the number of schools for black children. Like the Holy Family Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy can rejoice in their status as pioneers in the field of black education.

Like Catherine before her, Austin Carroll seems to have possessed an extraordinary confidence in God's providence, even when tensions with clergy developed. Austin had served fifteen years in happy rapport with Archbishop Odin, who had invited the Mercys to New Orleans, and then with Archbishop Perche, who had consented to each of the Mercy branches.<sup>21</sup> This included Belize when Father, later Bishop, Salvatore di Pietro, S.J., invited Mercies to staff the schools.

While the sisters prepared for the Central American mission, an auxiliary bishop was sent to New Orleans to handle finances. Archbishop Perche gave a special blessing to the Mercy missionaries before he sailed to France for funds.

In Perche's absence, auxiliary Leray forbid the founding of the Belize branch, and Austin sent the news of a lengthy delay to di Pietro. Instead of awaiting the return of Perche, di Pietro sought and quickly obtained Rome's permission for the mission branch. Although Austin left for Central America to establish her sisters there, she did not take ship blindly. On her value scale, however, the education of the girls of Belize outweighed future problems with an angry auxiliary.<sup>22</sup> Archbishop Perche died within that year, unfortunately, for Leray had automatic succession.

Evidently still angry, Leray claimed that the New Orleans branch convents were against the Mercy Rule. He said he intended to close not only Belize but also the branches on the Gulf Coast and in Louisiana. Austin decided that she must try to save the new mission as well as the other schools, eight of them black at that time. She gathered supportive letters and documents from bishops in the branch areas, and asked Bishop Kirby of the Irish College in Rome to present her material.<sup>23</sup> Then she entrusted it to God. Long study in Rome resulted in the decision that the rule would not be broken and that all the branch convents could continue. A loving providence had preserved the branch convents and their schools.

For the rest of her life Austin was to suffer for the zeal and compassion that inspired her to establish the Mercies in Belize. Austin's sisters elected her for a second term of three years, which was nullified by false accusations, as Leray claimed it was a fourth election. Austin could make no headway with Leray. He said Austin had disobeyed him, but did not admit that she obeyed Rome instead. Nor did he mention that he referred to the Belize trip two years earlier when Perche was archbishop. God gave Austin, as he had given Catherine before her, the grace to accept the false complaints.

Her sisters saw Austin's peace and resignation. Only in confidential letters to her spiritual advisor did she reveal her feelings. Then her words almost echo those of Catherine in similar circumstances.

*I am resigned, and I try not to allow my mind to be embittered at what has been done to me, which I embrace as my portion of the cross... I have always tried to serve the Church to the best of my ability. The same with God's help I shall do in the future.. .Pray that God may give me perfect resignation.*<sup>24</sup>

Austin was sustained for 24 more years by an Irish faith that saw the cross as a guarantee that her work was God's own. She continued it until a stroke canceled her activities a few months before her death in 1909. Obituaries across the South lauded first her life

of charity and compassion, then her efforts for schools and justice for all. One said that "her monuments were the many schools, libraries and charitable institutions she established" and that she would "live on in the hearts and lives of those for whom she labored, and especially, in the mind of the God she served so well."<sup>25</sup> "She shrank from no sacrifice to enlighten or relieve the poor," wrote Bishop Hogan, adding that her Leaves would not fade."<sup>26</sup>

Editors in the North agreed with him in mentioning her writing as headlines read: "A Distinguished Author," "Most successful Catholic Writer," "Author of Merit."<sup>27</sup> Joanna Regan wrote, "Austin was a serious scholar, and her anecdotal biography and annals are superb revelations of Catherine as woman and superior...and contributed to the identity of the Sisters of Mercy, helping to keep the same history, tradition and spirit alive in groups who never saw one another."<sup>28</sup> With an apt turn of phrase, Austin shaped many of Catherine's sayings into the form remembered. For instance, Mary Sullivan noted that Catherine's "good cup of tea" was transformed by Austin into the "comfortable cup of tea" that all recall.<sup>29</sup>

In gathering the many threads of her research, Austin gradually formed a rope strong enough to connect Mercies on opposite sides of the world. Her early letters stirred Mercies to send information, later news and friendship. Austin enclosed her heart in return and often exclaimed, "What a joy it will be to meet in heaven."<sup>30</sup>

#### Footnotes

1. Bessie Belloc, *Historic Nuns* (London: Duckworth, 1898), 71.
2. M. Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, 4 vols. (New York: Catholic Publication Society Co., 1881-1895), 1:255-65.
3. *Ibid.*, 1:262.
4. *Ibid.*, 4:411.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 4:159, 222; see also *Dunigan's American Catholic Almanac* (New York: E. Dunigan & Bro., 1858).
7. *Ibid.*, 2:458.
8. Regina Werntz, RSM, "Mary Austin Carroll," *Shapers and Movers of the U.S. Catholic Church*, 3 vols. video (RSM Creative Service and Daughters of St. Paul, 1992), 2.

9. Maureen Crossen, RSM, "Vocation Crisis: a Challenge and a Possibility," *The MASTJournal* I (Fall, 1990):2.
10. ASM [Archives Sisters of Mercy], New Orleans.
11. M. Ignatia Neumann, RSM, *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 382.
12. ASM, New Orleans, Odin to Walker, 2/5/1869; Moynihan to Blanc, 6/28/1860.
13. M. Bertrand Degnan, RSM, *Mercy unto Thousands* (Maryland: Newman Press, 1957), 381, n. 12.
14. M. Celeste Rouleau, RSM, "Reading the Future of our Past," *Mast* 3 (Spring, 1993): 5.
15. ASM, New Orleans, Carroll to Elder, 12/10/1878.
16. Neumann, *Letters*, 353.
17. Catherine McAuley, *Cottage Controversy*, reprint ed. M. Austin Carroll, (New York: P. O'Shea, 1883). The 1964 reprint included Austin's additions of four approbations and her note about them. M. Clare Moore, *A Few of the Sayings, Instructions and Prayers of the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy*, reprint edited by M. Austin Carroll (New York: Catholic Publication Society Co., 1877). The Carroll preface gives Moore's name and the date of the first edition. Carroll changed the original title slightly from *A Little Book of Practical Sayings, Advises and Prayers of our Revered Foundress, Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*, which was published as the original compilation of Catherine's *Sayings* in London by Burns, Oates & Co. in 1868. The 1868 ed. was 4 x 6" and the 1877 ed. is 2 x 4" or half the original. Original title seems to have been shortened to fit smaller page size. Except for addition of preface no other change was made.
18. See the "Mary Austin Carroll Bibliography" in the author's *Abounding in Mercy* (New Orleans: Habersham, 1988), 441-46.
19. Consuela Duffy, *Katharine Drexel* (Philadelphia: Reilly, 1966), 310.
20. Peter Clark, *Mother Henriette Delille* (New Orleans: Laborde, 1992), 21.
21. ASM, New Orleans.
22. *Ibid.*, see also *Abounding in Mercy*, 207-48.
23. *Ibid.*, Carroll to Kirby, 10/17/1883.
24. *Ibid.*, Carroll to Kirby, 1/29/1886.
25. *The Mobile Daily Register*, 12/2/1909.
26. *Kansas City Catholic Register*, 12/31/1909.
27. *The Boston Pilot*, 12/18/1909; *New York Freeman's Journal*, 12/18/1909; *The Brooklyn Tablet*, 12/31/1909.
28. ASM, New Orleans, M. Joanna Regan to author, 3/17/1983.
29. Mary C. Sullivan, "Comforting and Animating: the Generative Work of Catherine McAuley," *Mast* 3 (Fall, 1992) :9, 13, n.8.
30. ASM, Detroit, Carroll to Bertrand, 7/27/1906.

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# Mercy Grows in Brooklyn: Mother Mary Vincent Haire

Julia Upton, R.S.M.

*There's a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed falls, it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky. It grows in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps. It grows up out of cellar gratings. It is the only tree that grows out of cement. It grows lushly . . . survives without sun, water, and seemingly without earth.<sup>1</sup>*

The tree to which the author refers is the iolanthus. When I was a child one grew outside my bedroom window, and I marveled at its phenomenal yearly growth. Today I marvel even more that each spring trees begin to grow in the most impossible places, right up through the concrete battlements erected on New York City parkways. The life force is truly amazing!

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**The life-force of Mercy in Brooklyn is similarly amazing, when you look at the concrete battlements through which the community had to grow—poverty . . .**

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The life-force of Mercy in Brooklyn is similarly amazing, when you look at the concrete battlements through which the community had to grow—poverty, disease, prejudice, and a deadly plague of jealousy. At the root of our amazing foundation are two spirited women whom I bring together in this presentation—a reconciliation that is itself amazing as you will discover on this excursion into the past.

Before we begin, let me give you my reasons for taking you on this trip. I am neither an archivist nor a historian, but as a systematic theologian, I use history principally to tell me about the present and to set my course to the future. Rather than a purely historical account, therefore, what will unfold here is more of a reflection on history, laced with a bit of conjecture and wonderment here and there, that might help us to see God's Mercy growing in Brooklyn.

The official foundress of the Brooklyn Regional Community is Ellen Haire, the daughter of Edmund and Catherine Haire who was born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland in 1821. She entered the Sisters of Mercy Convent, Baggot Street on Mercy Day, 1844. She received the holy habit and her name, Sister Mary Vincent on April 19, 1845. As a novice, she volun-

teered for the Dublin community's foundation to New York, and so was one of the party of eight who set out from Ireland on April 15, 1846. They arrived in New York on May 14, 1846 living first with the Sisters of Charity on East Broadway until their first convent was ready for occupancy on West Washington Place. This became known as St. Catherine's Convent, where Sister Mary Vincent lived until she left to found the Sisters of Mercy in Brooklyn.

Sister Mary Vincent Haire was the first Sister of Mercy to be professed in New York. Her profession on April 27, 1847 was held at the "old" St. Patrick's Cathedral on the corner of Mulberry and Mott Streets, where she received the black veil from the bishop. Although the community then numbered only ten, including two postulants, since it was the first ceremony of its kind ever witnessed in New York, the cathedral was packed with eager onlookers.

According to a letter she wrote back to Reverend Mother Cecilia Marmion in Ireland 3 days later, in the presence of such a large congregation she dreaded her profession, but "thanks to the prayers of many" was quite calm and felt not the least tremor as she held the candle during the Mass. When the moment came, she ascended the Altar steps and read her Act of Profession without faltering.

*The motto on my ring says "Not my will but Thine be done" and "Father into Thy hands I commend my Spirit." The first has been my greatest support and often my only prayer in desolation and anguish of mind.*

I find her courage to be inspiring. I remember feeling the same kind of desperation the day before my first profession, but I was surrounded by family and friends who, if not entirely supportive of my decision, surely continued to embrace me with their love. Sister Mary Vincent had left home and family behind in Ireland, knowing surely that she would not be returning. God's grace and providence embraced her because she opened herself to receive it.

Brooklyn's first Bishop, Most Reverend John Loughlin was consecrated in November 1853. He had previously served as Vicar General of the Archdiocese of New York where he had come to know the Sisters of Mercy.

On August 24, 1855, he appealed to the New York community for Sisters to work in his newly formed Diocese of Brooklyn.<sup>2</sup> The matter was "duly considered," terms were proposed on both sides, and they came to agreement on August 28, 1855—four days later. Given some of our contemporary discernment processes, their courage and sense of adventure are truly astounding. On September 12, 1855, only two

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weeks after the initial request, if you are keeping count of the days, Sister Mary Vincent Haire, at age 34 and after only 11 years in the community, was appointed superior of the new community.

She was accompanied by Sisters Mary Bernard Clarke and Mary Joseph Shine. Sisters Mary de Sales Walsh, Zita Mullin and two other professed lay Sisters were "loaned" from New York. Sister Mary de Sales remained the longest time and returned to New York on March 18, 1857, one month after Sister Agnes Carroll, a novice from St. Catherine's, transferred to Brooklyn from the New York community. They were also accompanied by a postulant, Julia McKenna, whose name is often curiously omitted from the lists.<sup>3</sup>

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## Mother Vincent had a gentle, loving nature and was keenly alive to the sorrows of others.

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According to the annals of the New York community, Mother Vincent had a gentle, loving nature and was keenly alive to the sorrows of others. She occasionally returned to St. Catherine's for retreats, but her most memorable visit was at the time of the death and burial in December 1859 of her beloved friend and superior, Mother Mary Agnes O'Connor. Together the members of the original group that left Ireland in 1846 comforted and consoled one another.

The first convent on Jay Street in Brooklyn was an extension to the Bishop's house—"crowded and inadequate" as the annals note, with "not a chair nor a washstand for even the Superior. "Yet, in spite of these temporal difficulties, the convent soon became headquarters for alleviating the spiritual and bodily miseries of the poor and unfortunate.

*Scarcely had the Sisters arrived at Jay Street than the poor flocked to their doors in great numbers and begged for bread . . . The Reverend Mother with her staff of assistants presided at the counter which extended across the entrance of the so-called parlor. . . . All food items were placed in bags which the Sisters fashioned during their recreation periods . . .*

The Sisters also formed sewing circles among the women of St. James Parish. Home visitation of the infirm was begun, and the sufferings of the sick were alleviated by medicines and delicacies which were administered by the Sisters. Although the Brooklyn Regional Community has never sponsored a hospital, from our very beginnings visitation of the sick has always been and continues to be an integral part of our

daily lives. This ministry is not something we decide to do or are required to do. Rather, it seems to flow naturally from who we are as God's Mercy growing in Brooklyn.

Many prisoners in the Raymond Street Jail were also visited by the Sisters, who walked great distances in all sorts of weather to bring hope to these forgotten men. Criminals were prepared for death and occasionally "death cloths" were purchased for the inmates. This ministry also continues today, not only in New York City prisons, but also among the undocumented. The Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy staffed the girls' department of the first St. James Parochial School where they conducted evening classes for adults as well.

In 1859, four years after their coming to Brooklyn, the community welcomed a professed Sister who transferred from Kinsale. Alicia Lynch, daughter of Timothy and Sarah Lynch, was born on December 8, 1826 in Kinsale, Ireland. She entered the Convent of Mercy, Kinsale, Ireland, on May 8, 1844—the first applicant to the Kinsale foundation. She received the holy habit and name Sister Mary Joseph on November 28, 1844 and professed her vows on December 8, 1846. She helped in the foundation of both an elementary and an industrial school in Kinsale. Six years later, she left Kinsale, joining a group of fifteen Sisters of Mercy to serve in the Crimea where they worked with Florence Nightingale.

Upon returning from the war, and with the consent of Chapter, she transferred to the community of the Sisters of Mercy in the Jay Street Convent, Brooklyn. We do not know exactly why she emigrated. Kinsale is a charming seaport town, but given Mother Joseph's later life, one presumes that after the drama of war, Kinsale held little excitement for her. There is also some evidence that her sister had married a Frederick Swayne in Brooklyn, which might be the reason Sister Mary Joseph Lynch decided to join the Brooklyn community.

Having had considerable experience in administration of industrial and select schools and in the care of the sick, Mother Joseph made a dramatic entrance into the community on October 30, 1859. She was so highly esteemed by the Sisters that the following year she was elected as Mother Assistant to Mother Mary Vincent Haire, a post she held until 1871.

Sister Mary Lucy MacDonald concludes that: *Both Mother Mary Vincent Haire and Mother Mary Joseph Lynch were ably suited for leadership. By training and temperament they fostered the practical and spiritual good of souls, both in the works to which they gave their strength and service, and among the Sisters in community. They were two very capable, gracious and charming women, but Mother Joseph seems to have been the more venturesome and to have had a more aggressive personality.<sup>4</sup>*

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During their seven years at Jay Street, the community suffered many hardships. "Death visited the little community so frequently tradition says that 'the first branch from the motherhouse was a small colony sent to heaven, there to help the work on earth as only the saints can do.'" Between 1859 and 1869, five of the Sisters are known to have died: Sisters Joseph Shine (1859), Mary Teresa Sobbe (1863), Mary Francis McKenna (1864), Mary Agnes Rooney (1865) and Mary Bernard Clarke (1869), and four other Sisters died in the next two years.

Because of the overcrowded living conditions at Jay Street,<sup>6</sup> the Bishop obtained land and donated a large sum of money for a new convent building. The Sisters moved to their new home on Willoughby Avenue in November of 1862 although they continued to maintain the Girls' Department of St. James until 1869 when the Sisters of St. Joseph took over the work. The new convent was dedicated on December 3, 1862 and placed under the patronage of St. Francis of Assisi.

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## **God's plans for the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy seem to have been different from their own, but fortunately they listened for the voice of God in the signs of the times.**

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When their work at St. James ended, the Sisters began a private academy in the Convent of Mercy. Known as the "Select School," its mission was to educate the daughters of wealthy local Catholic families. They were successfully engaged in this work when a new pastor [sound familiar?] was named to the local parish. He wanted St. Patrick's to have a free parochial school, and since the community was so small it could not manage both, the "Select School" was discontinued. Until the parish school was built in 1891, the Sisters ran the free elementary and secondary school for the parish in the convent building where the private school had been located.

Another work of the Sisters was the introduction of the St. Francis Industrial School, organized by Mother Joseph Lynch and dedicated along with the new Convent of Mercy on December 3, 1862. Mother Vincent's heart went out to young girls who were in grave moral danger because they had neither home, nor friends, nor job training of any kind. Here girls were taught useful trades such as needlework, artificial flower making, family serving, making wreaths, banners, vestments and many other useful arts. The work

of the girls were advertised and their services were in demand from both manufacturers and private families.

In the "machine room," girls became skilled in shirt making—a most lucrative means of livelihood in those days since all men's shirts of the best and most expensive type were custom made.<sup>7</sup> Over a period of nine years, hundreds of girls were placed in respectable situations. After an existence of 45 years, the Industrial School was closed.

Although it was not Mother Vincent's intention to establish an orphanage, circumstances dictated otherwise. The Civil War was raging, immigrant ship fevers and epidemics scourged the city in 1854, 1860 and 1866, and lamentable working conditions left many children orphaned or neglected in their wake. In their visits to the sick, the Sisters quickly became aware of the desperate need for someone to care for these orphaned and neglected children.

God's plans for the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy seem to have been different from their own, but fortunately they listened for the voice of God in the signs of the times. Today, we sponsor three child-caring institutions: Angel Guardian Home, Mercy Home for Children and St. Mary's Children and Family Services. True to our foundresses and the voice of God, however, each has changed as the signs of the times have dictated.

Close to the Convent of Mercy were lots which were below street level and were occupied by numerous squatters. Since it was not possible for the Sisters to go to the homes of all the poor who requested assistance, a certain area on the street floor of the Convent of Mercy was set aside to be of service to those who came to the Sisters for alms. The "Poor Hall," as it was called, was not a place where people received money, but instead the Sisters gave those who asked tickets which could be used as cash in local grocery stores. The Sisters then settled the accounts with the storekeepers who had received the tickets. Another room located near the "Poor Hall" was the Convent Classroom. Here adults came at night to receive religious instructions from the Sisters.

In 1882, the year before her death, Mother Vincent purchased property to extend the Convent of Mercy building and allow more space for the increasing number of children coming under the care of the Sisters. The "children's side," as we called it for a hundred years, was completed in 1883. To this day, the Convent of Mercy stands in the midst of an impoverished neighborhood and tries to respond to the needs of its neighbors. The wing that once housed orphans and then developmentally disabled children, has now been reshaped to provide housing to homeless women.

Mother Vincent's health was not good, and she was often reported to be away from the community, recovering with family or friends. Mother Joseph, in her role as Mother Assistant, assumed responsibility for the daily affairs of the community. In time some

friction must have erupted between herself and others in the community. Although the annals do not speak of this directly, it is probably that her methods of dealing with tradesmen were very different from the way the other Sisters would handle things. Mother Joseph's correspondence gives us a glimpse into both her assertiveness and the virulence that this misunderstanding, or at worst jealousy, occasioned.

From 1871 to 1872, Mother Joseph was reported to have been staying at the Convent of Mercy in Worcester, Massachusetts, perhaps for health reasons, although no record of this is found in their archives. Letters in the Brooklyn archives addressed to Bishop Loughlin indicate that Mother Joseph kept him apprised of her decision to "brave the storm of calumny and weather it . . . with the assistance of God's grace."

*I will outlive the calumny. If God does not see fit to justify me at this side of the grave, I trust I will have the reward of silent suffering at the other. I can thank him now more than ever for the upright honest generous heart He has given me which I hope will never be sullied by underhand chicanery or lying. I have been in bed since I saw you. I have had a violent attack of my nerves (the third since I came home) . . . .<sup>8</sup>*

Correspondence in the archives in Rochester, New York indicates that Mother Joseph Lynch was loaned to them in order to assist in establishing an Industrial School at the Convent of Mercy there. Although at first she was inclined to remain in Brooklyn to "face her accusers," she made the decision to go to Rochester for one year, at the end of which she stipulated that she would return to Brooklyn.

*All seems like an unpleasant dream and I feel perfectly happy at my last decision. I forgive freely from my heart as I hope to be myself forgiven by my Maker—all that has been said against me. Time may unravel the secret machinations of my enemies. Perhaps there's no intention in the world to injure me on anyone's part. God is the only searcher of hearts. His will be done in me.<sup>9</sup>*

After successfully completing her work in Rochester in April of 1873, she applied to return to the Brooklyn Community, but her request was denied although the reasons are not recorded. Again, correspondence is helpful. Sister Mary Teresa McManus, who later served as Mother Assistant to Mother Vincent Haire, wrote to the Bishop on February 26, 1873.

*Rev. Mother entreats you to fulfill your promise at once and write Sr. M. J. that she cannot return. She says she depends on you to keep her away, not to send her after she returns for that will be [sic] much more difficult piece of business for you.*

Although Sister Mary Teresa McManus was probably serving as secretary to Mother Mary Vincent at this time, it is curious to me that she wrote in her own name and not in the Superior's. I also find the use of initials rather than names surprising. Perhaps I've been watching too much Jessica Fletcher but I sense intrigue.

The Bishop did write to "Mother M. Joseph Lynch" on March 8, 1873. It was a terse note:

*This is to inform you that as the Community are unwilling that you should return to their Convent, you will not be admitted into it. I could not consent to it. I am satisfied that neither they nor you could be happy if you were there.<sup>10</sup>*

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## **The good she did while she was among us . . . endures today, and not just in Brooklyn, but clear across the country.**

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The Bishop's letter, however, did not deter her determination to return to Brooklyn unless she received "in writing a statement of what the Community" had against her. "It is not the Community," she wrote in her immediate reply to him, "it is the prejudice of two or three."<sup>11</sup> She goes on to elaborate and chronicle at length what seems 120 years later to be jealousy gone wild.

*If I get in writing a list of all the faults the Srs. have against me before I leave Rochester, and for what cause I am refused to be admitted where I did not give up my claim, only came in obedience to you for one year, I can then steer my course, but to enter a Community and sail under false colors, that I will never do. I am too honorable to do a mean or underhand [sic] act.<sup>12</sup>*

A postscript notes, "Rev. Mother is ill nine weeks. Well, I was not the one now that troubled her. I blame her not, no I blame her advisors. May God forgive them as I do."<sup>13</sup>

On April 22, 1873, the Sisters "assembled to ascertain willingness or unwillingness . . . to have Sister Mary Joseph Lynch return to their community. "The Brooklyn archives record that her request was rejected by a unanimous vote. A month or so later, Mother Joseph Lynch did receive a letter directly from Mother Vincent Haire and started immediately for Brooklyn. Although that letter is not extant in the archives of the Brooklyn Regional Community, Mother Joseph Lynch quotes from the letter in a letter she later wrote to the Bishop. Mother Vincent Haire's

letter said:

*Your conduct in the past has been so disedifying and has caused so much suffering to many of the Sisters, as well as to myself, that we all prefer that you remain where you are.*

Mother Joseph returned to Brooklyn in order to face the charges against her. Once home she saw for herself that remaining in Brooklyn would not be possible.

On September 23, 1873, she independently made a foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in Grand Rapids, and in 1878 in Big Rapids, Michigan. Later she opened schools and hospitals in Michigan, Minnesota and in Portland, Oregon. She also operated an Indian Mission School in Morris, Minnesota. She celebrated her Golden Jubilee on December 8, 1896, and died in Portland, Oregon on May 19, 1898. Difficulties in relationships, particularly with Bishops, and financial problems plagued her all across the country but in the end she found peace.

The May 20, 1898 issue of the Morning Oregonian reported the news of her death:

*Mother Mary Joseph . . . passed quietly away . . . Her end was one of great peace. The prayers for the departing soul had been said half an hour previously; her hand held the half burnt-out candle, now relighted, which had been blessed nearly 54 years before, when she received the habit of the Sisterhood of Mercy; the Crucifix sent her by Pope Pius IX, during her work as nurse in the Crimean war, was also with her during these last prayers. So calm was her passing away that those watching over her could hardly say at what moment it occurred.*

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**We cannot authentically  
be God's Mercy unless  
we have first received  
God's mercy, poured out  
and overflowing.**

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Mother Vincent Haire died suddenly on March 29, 1883.<sup>14</sup> At the time of her death, there were 33 Sisters in the Congregation: 12 Lay Professed, 17 Choir Professed, three Novices and one Postulant. Mother Joseph Lynch was with the Brooklyn Community for thirteen years, exactly as long as I have been with them. The good she did while she was among us, however, endures today, and not just in Brooklyn, but clear across the country. We take great pride in telling the tales of our illustrious Industrial School, but it was the

synergy of these two great women who initiated all the works in which we are engaged today.

They probably never managed to effect a reconciliation in life. We had a "Welcome Home" party for Mother Joseph Lynch shortly after the publication of Sister Mary Lucy MacDonald's biography of her, and told their story, but at the time I didn't see how important they were for each other and for our Institute of Mercy. They show us at our best and at our worst—saints and sinners all. If you have ever been walled-out by another's jealousy, you know of its virulence. We cannot authentically be God's Mercy unless we have first received God's mercy, poured out and overflowing. And we cannot receive God's mercy unless we stand in need of it. Sister Virginia Farnan was always quick to remind us that "to be a Sister of Mercy is to declare yourself a public sinner." To adapt the words of Jesus,

*"Therefore, I tell you, their sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence they have shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." (Luke 7:47).*

#### Footnotes

1. Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1943) 3.
2. According to *Our First 100 Years: The Reminiscences of Sister Mary Cecilia Fitzgerald*, "So profoundly impressed by the dignity and religious bearing of Sister Mary Vincent was Dr. Loughlin, that when he asked the Sisters to cross the river and found a Convent of Mercy in Brooklyn, he requested that Sister Mary Vincent be sent as Superior.
3. Records show a discrepancy. Some list her as joining the Sisters in October of 1855 which would not put her on the list of "founders."
4. Sister Mary Lucy MacDonald, RSM, *By Her Fruits ... Sister Mary Joseph Lynch—Sister of Mercy 1846-1898* (Farmington Hills, MI: Religious Sisters of Mercy, 1981) 32.
5. Sister Mary Eulalia Herron, *The Sisters of Mercy in the United States 1843-1928* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 44.
6. The local census of 1865 records seventeen Sisters of Mercy and seventeen other females in residence, with an age range from four to fifty-one.
7. *Our First 100 Years*, 4.
8. Undated letter from Mother Joseph Lynch to R. Rev. John Loughlin, D.D., c. May 1872.
9. Undated letter to Rt. Rev. John Loughlin, D.D., c. 1872.
10. All of the correspondence with Bishop Loughlin comes from the archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn. In this case, the letter exists in two drafts, indicating that he eliminated a somewhat sarcastic final sentence.
11. Letter from Mother Joseph Lynch to Bishop John Loughlin, dated March 10, 1873.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. The cause of death was listed as "valvular lesions and dilation of the heart—dropsy."

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# The Mercy Foundation of Loretto-Cresson, Pennsylvania

Anne Frances Pulling, R.S.M.

The Loretto-Cresson community of Pennsylvania is a first generation, direct descendant, of the Pittsburgh Mercy Community. In December 1843 the first band of Sisters of Mercy were crossing the Alleghenies on the last lap of their journey to Pittsburgh. The coach in which they were riding, with Bishop Michael O'Connor rumbled along Route 22 through the little town of Loretto. His Excellency seized the opportunity to relay the story of the saintly prince-priest, Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin who brought the Catholic faith to the mountaineers.

Gallitzin, later known as Apostle of the Alleghenies, was a prince whose father was Russian Ambassador to the Hague. The first priest to receive his three major orders in the United States, he sacrificed his princely inheritance and career to serve the church as a missionary in the American Wilderness. He fulfilled this mission faithfully for over four decades despite seemingly unsurmountable obstacles. His earnest death bed prayer, in May 1841, was that religious communities would carry on his work in his remote but vast domain. Gallitzin dedicated his little settlement to Our Blessed Lady and his Parish to St. Michael. Bishop O'Connor pointed out the Chapel House built by Prince Gallitzin and the grave of the Prince. Mother Xavier Warde made a declaration that would seal the destiny of Mercy on the Alleghenies when she stated: "In the Providence of God we will have Sisters of Mercy here someday."

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## Privations were extensive and hardships intense in the primitive living conditions of the mountains.

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Five years later another stage coach rumbled eastward, from Pittsburgh, toward Loretto. It was May 1848 and four Sisters of Mercy were about to establish a foundation on the mountain. The request came from Fr. Hugh Gallagher, Pastor of St. Michael's Parish, Loretto. Just one year earlier, in 1847, the Franciscan Priests and Brothers, already established in education, had settled in Loretto on a scenic hillside overlooking the chapel house.

They, along with many parishioners, gave the Sisters a hearty welcome and escorted them to a little convent prepared for them. This was the beginning of a rapport between two religious communities that

would endure into the twentieth century. The initial task of the Sisters was the preparation of children for the Sacraments. Classes were first conducted in an abandoned tinnier's shop beside the convent. By September, 1848, a class of students had been readied for First Holy Communion and Bishop Michael O'Connor came to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. The Superior of this pioneer group was Mother Catherine Wynne who later established the Baltimore foundation. Sisters Rose Hostetter, Lucy McGivern and Augusta Goole were her companions in Loretto.

Privations were extensive and hardships intense in the primitive living conditions of the mountains. The long severe winters were specially difficult. An open fireplace, with only wood from the forests as fuel, provided the sole means of heating and cooking. Food was often scarce and the only source of water was a pump outside. Snowdrifts, rampant on the Alleghenies, added to the rugged living conditions of the Sisters.

The following year, 1849, Mother Gertrude Blake was appointed superior. She gave the foundation a needed permanence and stability. Professed at Baggott Street, Dublin, during the life of Catherine McAuley, she established the Birr foundation in County Offaly, Ireland. She came to the United States in 1845 when volunteers were recruited for the American mission. During her tenure of office Loretto Academy, known as "Young Ladies Academy of Our Lady of Loretto" was established on a picturesque hillside beside the church. Mother Gertrude Blake was very fond of Loretto and retained her position as local superior while serving on the council in Pittsburgh. The stately brick edifice, with spacious grounds, was formally opened in May 1853.

In the spring of 1866, a young Sister of twenty-two years, Sr. Gertrude Cosgrave, was sent to the Allegheny Mountains to regain her health. She had been steadily growing weaker and her superiors assumed the mountain air would restore her vigor. The restorative powers of the Alleghenies had a profound effect upon this sensitive, refined and dignified young sister. Little could her superiors envision the significant role she would play in the permanent establishment of Mercy on the mountains. Emma Cosgrave (later Mother Gertrude) had been born in Pittsburgh in 1844. Her father, John Cosgrave, made his way to positions of distinction in the coal shipping business. Her mother was Henrietta Bagley Cosgrave. The couple, parents of seven children, were prominent in social circles. Mother Gertrude entered Mercy in



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1863 and was professed in 1865.

It was in Loretto Academy that Mother Gertrude met a companion with whom she would long be closely associated. Young Sr. deSales Ihmsen and she became close friends and were drawn closer together through similar sorrows. Their fathers had died within a year of each other. This would become a link in a chain of events that would bring the two together in a life of friendship and love of God. The Ihmsen family was instrumental in the establishment of St. Xavier's Academy in Latrobe and was among its earliest benefactors. Amelia Ihmsen (Mother deSales) was born in Pittsburgh in 1839. Her father, Christian, was a Bavarian immigrant who made his fortune in the plate glass industry, and her mother, Eleanor O'Connor Ihmsen of Pittsburgh, was of Irish descent. Ten children followed. Mother deSales was professed in 1860. She was tall and slender with expressive grey eyes and rosy complexion. Her gracious, gentle disposition won her many friends. She was dignified and distant yet her magnetic personality endeared her to Sisters and students alike. Her executive ability and deep faith served her well when the time came to sever ties with Pittsburgh.

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**She chose as a motto for the new foundation a quotation from Psalm 125:**  
**“They that trust in the Lord are as Mount Sion.”**

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**Foundation of Loretto**

This idea had been under consideration for some time and the little community was much in favor. On May 29, 1879 at the Chapter of Elections held at St. Mary's, Webster Ave, Pittsburgh, Bishop John Tuigg designated Loretto an independent motherhouse, a distinct Mercy entity and a new foundation. Mother deSales agreed to the added challenge of leadership with her close assistant, Sr. Gertrude Cosgrave. She took the oath of office solemnly then they received a special blessing from the Bishop before boarding the Pennsylvania railroad to the Allegheny Mountains. Home had taken on new meaning. As for the matter of postulants for the new foundation, she could no longer draw from other houses for Sisters. She would have to find her own. She chose as a motto for the new foundation a quotation from Psalm 125: “They that trust in the Lord are as Mount Sion.”

The new foundation would comprise, aside from Mother deSales Ihmsen and Mother Gertrude Cosgrave: Sr. Bridget Tobin, the first lay Sister in the United States and Sr. M. Justina Daly whose intense

love of nature gave her a proprietary interest in the grounds. Included were Sr. Theodore Lally and Sr. Loretta O'Brien, both of whom had already spent many years in Loretto. All had been members of the Pittsburgh community and, like the seven pioneers before them, were women of faith and courage. It took brave hearts to face the difficulties they would encounter. All of these pioneers, who would form the nucleus of the Loretto-Cresson community had their Mercy beginnings in St. Xavier's in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. The flexibility characteristic of Sisters of Mercy was evidenced in this little community. It took courage to sever ties with the parent community.

If Mother deSales had any trepidation about postulants it was quickly dissipated. Within the first six months two girls, Margaret Carney and Jane O'Friel, natives of Loretto, joined Mercy. In the first two years there were thirteen vocations to the young, struggling community.

In memory of her sister, Sr. M. Aloysius Ihmsen, she renamed the academy Mount Aloysius. Sr. Aloysius Ihmsen was among the Sisters assigned to the Loretto mission in its early days. Following a tour of duty in the Civil War, she came to Loretto, where she died on March 16, 1872. She is buried at St. Xavier's. Mother de Sales and her co-worker Mother Gertrude were compatible leaders, women of unusual wisdom possessing foresight, shrewdness, and prudence with a fair share of amiability. For many years they were alternately elected to succeed each other as superior. This gave the young community stability and unity.

In 1885 the new motherhouse made its first foundation when five Sisters opened St. Matthew School, in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. This school is still in operation.

**Foundation of Cresson**

Cresson of the nineteenth century was a thriving health and recreational resort, 2500 feet above sea level, in the heart of the Alleghenies. The Mountain House dominated the landscape and afforded a haven for those who came to enjoy the resort and avail themselves of the medicinal waters of the Cresson Springs. Cresson attracted such distinguished guests as Abe Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Jenny Lind and President Benjamin Harrison. Numerous cottages sprang up on the Mountain House grounds erected by the elite who summered in the pure mountain air. Among these is the home of Andrew Carnegie which is currently under re-construction. Accessibility to the railroad was non-existent in Loretto and, at the turn of the century, the Sisters recognized a need for more adequate transportation.

In 1891 a site was chosen in Cresson, opposite the Mountain House and construction begun on what would pick up the echo of a faltering resort. Popularity of seaside resorts were on the rise and mountain

resorts were experiencing a decline. Cresson was destined to become a mecca for education. 1897 marked the last season for holiday makers at the Mountain House and the opening of Mount Aloysius Academy in Cresson with commencement exercises.

Construction took five years. A kiln was set up and bricks were made from clay on the property. Trees from surrounding woodlands provided much of the interior woodwork. When completed the edifice resembled a picturesque chateau of northern France. Nature had lavished its bounty upon these mountains. A strong artistic building of massive proportions, parallel to the railroad, faced the rising sun. Its tower, piercing the horizon, became, and still remains a landmark. The castle-like building stood as a tribute to the stalwart women who planned it. The academy had high educational standards. During the first decade of the twentieth century enrollment increased and it became necessary to enlarge the facility. A residence hall and an alumnae hall for assemblies were added.

Until this period in history the mountain community was part of the Pittsburgh Diocese. In May, 1901, the Diocese of Altoona was established with Msgr. Eugene Garvey, Vicar General of the Scranton Diocese as first Bishop. This created a further separation from the original motherhouse. However, by 1900, the Loretto- Cresson Community had attained a sense of secure independence for it now numbered seventy five sisters.

The vacant academy building in Loretto was transformed into a Children's Home but the project was short lived. The fiftieth anniversary of the Immaculate Conception, Dec, 8, 1904, was to be celebrated. The chapel was decorated for the occasion, but by some mishap a candle fell over and the fire completely destroyed the building. The Sisters managed to get all fifty children to safety just before the building collapsed. Salvaged bricks were used in the present convent which was complete within a year. The Sisters never left Loretto.

When the disastrous Johnstown Flood of 1889 claimed over 2000 lives, a Memorial Hospital was immediately established. By the end of its first decade, there was an obvious need for a Catholic hospital. In 1910, Mother deSales, who had experience in education and building new foundations, envisioned yet another project: a Mercy Hospital for Johnstown. She chose the site and followed its progress. But by early 1911, when the hospital formally opened, she was an invalid and almost blind. Throughout her physical pain and blindness she maintained a cheerful spirit as she had always practiced in adversity. She died peacefully on May 19, 1911 in the 51st year of profession.

Mother Gertrude, sorrowful at the loss of her friend and partner of so many years, continued to shape the future as new times called forth new demands and trends. She was a born teacher who exerted a lasting influence on students.

The young Sister Gertrude Cosgrave, sent to the mountains to regain her health six decades earlier, had matured into a venerable, revered co-foundress who grew old gracefully and graciously. She died peacefully at Cresson on January 28, 1927 at age eighty- three, in the sixty- first year of religious profession

These foundresses have left us a legacy of vision, courage, flexibility, strength of purpose and trust in divine providence. They both came from families of considerable wealth yet both endured incredible poverty and privation. They instilled the spirit of poverty into the growing community.

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## **The depression, with its nationwide struggle for economic sustenance became a turning point for the Sisters in our mountain community.**

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The depression, with its nationwide struggle for economic sustenance became a turning point for the Sisters in our mountain community. A depleted faculty and enrollment at Mount Aloysius Academy along with accumulated debts signaled the need for a pragmatist, a dreamer, a visionary who could give The Mount renewed vitality. The popularity of education in academies was declining. Another Sister deSales was destined to restore vitality to the faltering academy.

Sr. M. deSales Farley, grand niece of Mother Gertrude Cosgrave, and namesake of the foundress, was a newly appointed principal of the academy in 1936. She envisioned education beyond the secondary level. A native of New York, she entered Mercy at Cresson in 1912. Sr. deSales was quick to assess the post depression scene and make a decision, although not without opposition. She elicited the help of a talented faculty member, Sr. M. Silverius Shields, to put details and research into action.

Sr. Silverius has told the story of an afternoon in February, 1939, when Sr. deSales appeared in her classroom and announced, "I am going to open a Junior College and you are going to help me." To which Sr. M. Silverius humbly responded, "What is a Junior College?" In September, 1939, Mount Aloysius Junior College became a reality. Two decades later enrollment would reach four hundred. In 1961 the academy phased out and greater concentration was given the junior college. Accommodations for the increasing enrollment necessitated expansion.

In 1990 Mount Aloysius became a four- year college granting baccalaureate degrees. Always a community-conscious college The Mount has successfully

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kept pace with the changing times. In addition to the college, numerous elementary and high schools were staffed by the Sisters of Mercy of the Loretto-Cresson Community.

The Union of The Sisters of Mercy in 1929 merged individual communities into Provinces. Scranton Province, of which we became part, included Cresson, Dallas and Harrisburg with the motherhouse at Dallas, Pennsylvania. Three separate communities of Sisters of Mercy in Pennsylvania had become one. The amalgamation consolidated central government and established uniformity of custom throughout the nine provinces. It lasted six decades and seven General Administrators, including Sr. M. Concilia Moran of the Scranton province, until the creation of the institute in 1991. The legacy of the Loretto-Cresson Sisters echoes in Mother deSales foundational motto: "They that trust in the Lord are as Mount Sion"

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# Mary Teresa Maher of Cincinnati

Margaret Molitor, R.S.M.

Mother Mary Teresa Maher was born in 1824 and baptized Anna Marie. She was the daughter of Thomas and Maria Maher, respected citizens and devout Catholics of the city of Carlow, County Carlow. Her family in its various branches and connections had contributed generously to the services of the Church, giving religious, priests, two Cardinals, Cardinals Cullen and Moran. There is no record of Anna Marie's earliest education. She was about thirteen years old when Catherine McAuley and her five companions arrived in Carlow in April 1837. These Sisters came because of the insistent plea of Bishop Edward Nolan: "Give me a small band of your fervent nuns."

In 1845 when she was twenty-one, and after having become a trained musician, literate, articulate, and having overcome dowry difficulties, Anna Marie entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale and there made her religious profession in 1847. Later she served as Mistress of Novices; then in November 1855 the community elected her as successor of Mother Francis Bridgeman. A contemporary of Mother Teresa had described her as a religious of superior virtue and a woman of marked ability, integrity and beneficence. Her maturity of judgment and prudence of conduct outreached her years when, as a young superior at St. Joseph Convent she was presented with the important question of a possible American foundation.

For several years Archbishop Purcell had been eager to have the Sisters of Mercy in Cincinnati. He considered their special works as a community to be admirably adapted to meet the needs of the "Nascent Church of the West." He commissioned Mrs. Sarah Peter, a benevolent convert, to make an application on his part, and if she would succeed she should escort the Sisters directly to Cincinnati.

The next step was to decide who should accompany her. As usual, almost everybody was willing to make the sacrifice for the souls of Cincinnati; and that only tended to complicate matters. In the final selection there were four professed Sisters besides Mother Teresa; Sister Mary Gertrude O'Dwyer from County Kilkenny, at thirty-seven the eldest by four years, veteran of the Derby foundation, tireless tender of the sick and comforter of the afflicted; Sister Mary Baptist Kane was from Belfast, four years younger than Mother Teresa and ten years her junior in religion. Sister M. Baptist was conspicuously the scholar, a linguist and an effective teacher. Then there was her cousin Sister Stanislaus Murphy from County Antrim, now only eighteen, but already revealing her talent for domestic perfection. Sister Mary Francis Nunan was from Cork; although she was only seventeen she was

already marked for leadership.

The Annals of the Sisters of Mercy record that on Friday, July 23, 1858 the Sisters left their beloved convent amid the tears of the community and the sighs and lamentations of the people whom they had relieved and instructed. They went on to Cork, then to Bristol, England, where they remained a few days as guests of the Sisters of Mercy. On July 27 they left Bristol for Southampton where they met Mrs. Peter. July 28, at 1:00 pm they embarked on the Arago. Present to see them off were two Jesuit priests, Fathers Mount and Christie. The rough voyage of thirteen days resulted in much travel distress. On the twelfth day of their journey, the ship nosed into the lower bay of New York Harbor. At 10:00 am on the morning of August 9, the party disembarked to the carriages which a friend had provided and drove to the Convent of Mercy on Houston Street where there was a happy meeting of the Kinsale and Dublin Sisters. The newcomers remained in New York for nine days and availed themselves of the opportunity to visit local charitable institutions,

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**The Church was poor,  
the Sisters were poor  
and the people were  
still poorer.**

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At half past five o'clock on the evening of Wednesday, 18th of August 1858, Mother Teresa Maher with nine Sisters, four professed, four novices and one postulant amongst whom were one professed Lay Sister and one Lay Novice, arrived with Mrs. Sarah Peter in Cincinnati, and drove to her residence on Lytle Street where a temporary convent had been prepared for them. Next day the Archbishop offered Mass there, blessed the house and called the Sisters' quarters there, "Convent of the Divine Will." On August 25 the Archbishop returned to Mrs. Peter's home. This time he was accompanied by two Jesuit priests, Rev. Charles Driscoll and Rev. Michael Lawler. At this time he canonically appointed Sister Teresa as Mother Superior of the Community, Sister Baptist Kane as Mother Assistant and Sister Gertrude O'Dwyer as Community Bursar. August 24 was the day which the Archbishop chose for an annual celebration for the Cincinnati foundation. Before engaging in their new active apostolate the eleven Sisters of Mercy made their annual retreat under the direction of

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Rev. Charles Driscoll, S.J.

Mrs. Sarah Peter's hospitality, which was in every way worthy of a great-hearted woman, was accepted by the Sisters only until such time as they could find suitable living quarters of their own. Nearly a month elapsed before any substantial progress was made toward that end. Father Driscoll and Father Senez, pastor of St. Thomas Church, were deputed by the Archbishop to show Mother Teresa a house near St. Thomas Church which seemed to his Grace and the above-named Fathers more suitable for beginning the works of Mercy than Mrs. Peter's house. The house was an old frame structure, damp, airless and disintegrating from age and neglect. It would take a great deal of repairing simply to make it minimally habitable; as a facility for a school and home for homeless girls, it was almost comically inadequate. But, the Sisters rationalized, what did that matter, so long as they were finally settled in their own convent and ready to work. The Church was poor, the Sisters were poor and the people were still poorer.

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## **The humble offerings of the working classes added to the Sisters' little stock and by degrees they began to acquire the necessities.**

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On Monday, October 11, 1858, the community removed from Mrs. Peter's house to their own convent at the back of St. Thomas Church, Sycamore Street. On the Sisters' entrance to their new abode, it offered a deplorable sight of neglect and filth. The basement of the Church contained accumulations of lumber, etc., and had been neglected for years. To open this basement for school in all possible haste was a difficult task. For their new Convent, the Sisters had no furniture except beds. Owing to generosity of the Reubens, the Springers and John Slevins, they got twelve beds and covering for the House of Mercy and were enabled to take young women and children at once. The Sisters provided themselves with a kitchen table by placing a board over two barrels. The humble offerings of the working classes added to the Sisters' little stock and by degrees they began to acquire the necessities. On the evening of the 25th of October, the night schools opened and though the evening was wet there was a considerable attendance. On the morning of Tuesday the 26th of October, the Infant Boys' School opened. Father Converse, S.J., marched the little boys from the College to the Sister's school and, the chronicler observed, "though they had no conveniences for beginning the school, the little creatures

looked pleased and happy." Thus the Sisters of Mercy had set in motion in Cincinnati all the major elements of their social apostolate.

The new issue of the Catholic Telegraph which arrived on November 20 contained two long, unbroken columns of praise for Catherine McAuley and her Institute, with a climaxing tribute to the Cincinnati community.

*The date of the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy in this city is 18 of August, 1858. The number attending their night-schools is 175 to 200 grown girls, who are employed during the day in working for their support. The Sisters have paid three hundred and sixty visits to the sick and dying since their arrival; relieved them spiritually and corporally, as far as their limits permitted. The Sisters regret these means are too limited for the wants of the distressed poor who daily, almost hourly, meet their view. Eighty infant boys are registered in their day-school and they hope to have also a day-school for female children, when circumstances will permit. Fifteen young women, of good character, have received hospitality and shelter in their house of mercy within the last month many of whom have been provided with situations.*

The chronicler gives an interesting and rather amusing account of the Sisters' first Christmas:

*On Christmas Eve, a very fine piano (evidently unpaid for) was brought to the Convent and presented to the Reverend Mother by the children of the night School; and on the same day a large cake, a box of raisins, three drums of figs and a metal tea set were sent to the Sisters.*

The Feast of Saint Bartholomew, the first anniversary of the Sisters of Mercy in Cincinnati, was a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving. For all their hard-won satisfaction, there was much still to be encountered. The ever-multiplying demands on heads and hearts and hands were taking their toll on the Sisters. Mother Teresa knew that their damp, ill-ventilated house was not a suitable home for her religious. The place could neither be cooled in summer nor heated in winter and the "fresh" air they managed to attract their way was a vapor distilled of all the industries that made Cincinnati rich and great. It was, most of all, the odors resulting from the pork packing industry,

Early in 1860 Mother Teresa and Mother Gertrude, impelled by concern over "the rapidly declining health of the community," consulted Archbishop Purcell about an immediate change of residence. Recognizing the imperative need, His Grace authorized the Sisters to negotiate the purchase of the vacated German orphanage. The property was located on Fourth Street between John Street and Central Avenue and extending to Third Street. The building and its location were a decided improvement over the

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Sycamore Street Convent. It provided facilities for a larger number of religious and their expanding activities. On April 27, 1860, the Sisters of Mercy bought the property for \$29,000. The Sisters paid \$6,000, the proceeds of their Fair and Pic Nic, as their first payment and mortgaged the property for the remaining \$23,000 which they agreed to pay off as best they could before ten years from the date of purchase, and to give six per cent interest on the debt till paid.

In July, 1860, the community moved to Fourth Street and the works begun at Sycamore continued without interruption. Fourth Street was a wonderful improvement. Days after moving, the community lost its first member to death. Her death, the annalist tells us, was the first of a series within the next few years. This sad story was the result of unwholesome housing, the rigors of the American climate and the long hours of strenuous work. July 10, 1860 had been set for the Profession of Sister Mary Joseph Leahy and Sister Mary Campbell. Two days before the appointed time, Sister Mary Joseph who had been ill, was in grave danger of death. The last Sacraments were administered. Next morning Archbishop Purcell went to the infirmary to receive her profession of vows, although the scheduled date was only twenty-four hours away. She rallied for another few weeks just long enough to taste the joys of religious profession. Sister Mary Joseph died peacefully on August 22, 1860 at age 22. Her remains were buried in the yet unoccupied Mercy Sisters' plot in the St. Joseph's Old Cemetery.

The Angel of Death was a frequent visitor to the young Mercy Community. Sister Mary Xavier Scully died of the same disease consumption, that had felled Sister Mary Joseph. Sister Xavier, at age 27, died December 14, 1861. Twenty-two-year-old Sister Mary Angela Kiely, who had been professed in 1861, died December 28, 1863. The following January 9, Sister Mary Philomena Kenny, the young novice from Pittsburgh, also died of consumption (later called tuberculosis). Still another Pittsburgh novice, Sister Mary Evangelist Phelan, died November 29 that same year, 1864.

Considering the tragic losses sustained by the Cincinnati Community and the multiple demands on the remaining members, there must have been extraordinary faith and trust in God because the 1860's ushered in an intensified program of good works. A new school, evidently for girls only, opened in the Third Street house. The sodalities grew in size and activities. The House of Mercy with greatly expanded facilities for housing and training, also expanded in membership. The residents were homeless, immigrant girls, seeking employment as domestic servants, who often "found themselves subject to moral dangers when their scanty funds were depleted." Others were native born women of various ages. The requirements for admission were "need" and "good character." The

women were taught plain and fancy sewing in addition to being instructed in the performance of ordinary household tasks. Religion, reading, writing and arithmetic were the matter of their academic training.

That the training given might result in the women's obtaining employment, an employment bureau type of arrangement was maintained. Evidence for this is the "Register of Servants for Whom Employment Was Provided, 1858-1870," which included the name of the woman, the person to whom she was sent, the address, the capacity and occasionally an observation. The register lists more than 4400 women for whom "situations have been provided." An announcement in the Catholic Telegraph stated, "Ladies can be supplied, free of charge, with servants, by applying every day, Saturdays and Sundays excepted, at half past one o'clock." The Sisters also extended their aid to unemployed females of good character by opening a laundry on Fourth Street where "course and fine washing was done at reasonable terms. Clothes collected and returned free of charge." A sewing room was also provided where all kinds of plain work and baby clothes were made. The women were paid current rates for their work. A reporter for the Cincinnati Daily Commercial wrote of the Sisters, "If these various charitable objects do not furnish work enough to fill the time of twelve benevolent women, then we are at a loss to understand their capacity for labor."

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## **With the outbreak of the Civil War came still more demands on the services of the Sisters.**

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With the outbreak of the Civil War came still more demands on the services of the Sisters. Because the number of hospitals was inadequate to meet the needs of the sick and wounded soldiers, the military eye lighted upon the House of Mercy on Third Street. On October 21, 1861, the building was rented to the Government, officially rechristened McLean Barracks, and reopened as a "receiving depot for prisoners of war and state prisoners; also received deserters, stragglers, etc." The House of Mercy was compressed into the convent above it.

The first impulse of the Sisters was to come to the assistance of the men being moved into the sealed-off House of Mercy. When they offered to provide nursing services to the wretched inhabitants, the officials were not interested. However, through the influence of Mrs. Peter, they were permitted to visit the unfortunate soldiers, and much good was effected by the sympathy and relief afforded by the Sisters. The Sisters visited

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the men regularly until the last prisoner of war was freed or removed, in early November of 1865.

When news came of the surprise slaughter at Pittsburg Landing, Mayor Hatch appealed to Archbishop Purcell for more nursing Sisters to look after the Ohio boys. The message was transmitted to the religious communities in Cincinnati, and the Sisters of Mercy sent one-third of their professed community. That was only three, but included Mother Teresa, Mother Gertrude and Sister Stanislaus. Mother Teresa and Mother Gertrude had plenty of large-scale nursing experience during the plague in Ireland; all three had inherited the nursing tradition inaugurated in their institute, and had profited by the practical lessons in nursing methods developed by the Kinsale veterans of the Crimean War. Traveling down the Ohio and the Tennessee Rivers on the "Superior," the Sisters were occupied in sewing ticks, making bandages and preparing supplies sent with them from Cincinnati's Sanitary storehouses. They arrived at the Landing about a week after the cease-fire.

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Because of the deplorable conditions, the Sisters' arrival must have seemed a godsend indeed. At once they "applied themselves with generous zeal to the works of Mercy," while medical officials continued to bombard Washington for supplies and personnel that should have been on hand before the campaign was ever contemplated. No details of the conditions or work are found in the Annals, but they do tell us that several well-intentioned lay women "were likewise engaged in relieving the poor soldiers"—until "smallpox broke out amongst them. The ladies then fled in dismay, leaving the Sisters to continue alone their labor of love and danger." According to Surgeon Charles McDougall, Medical Director of the Army of the Tennessee, there were about sixty cases of smallpox at the Landing during May, and apparently the Mercys had them all to themselves. Mother Teresa

reserving the most offensive for her personal ministrations. It is not certain how long the Sisters remained, but it seems probable that they were there until the transfer of the patients to base hospitals at the end of August, 1862.

When the three Sisters returned without fanfare from Pittsburg Landing in 1862, it was not to a retreat of peace and rest they came but to many war-generated problems, and their two resources—vocations and donations—had all but dwindled away. Mother Baptist had a solution for one of the problems: lack of working capital. She would publish a prayer book. She probably had been considering this ever since she had observed how poorly equipped were American Catholics in such aids to their religious practice. The work was copyrighted January 29, 1864, under the title, "The Help of Christians. A Manual of Instructions and Prayers Compiled from Approved Sources by the Sisters of Mercy." When a copy was presented to the Archbishop, he sent this message to Mother Baptist: "God bless you! You have accomplished an arduous, a useful and most laudable task imposed by love for God, for souls, and love for your community."

The book seems to have sold quite well by current standards. At a return of fifteen cents per copy, however, it could not be expected to support the community and its works and pay off the mortgage all by itself. This Mother Teresa apparently realized when she consulted Kinsale about other means of making ends meet, no doubt still convinced that it was "quite contrary to our Rule to labor for our support," as she had warned Archbishop Purcell in 1857. The superior at Kinsale put her question to the Holy Father, and in reply Pio Nono declared that there was "nothing contrary to the letter or spirit of the Rule in using for support of the community money earned in House of Mercy, by laundry work or needlework, etc."; likewise that the sisters "might conscientiously use for their own support money resulting from state grants, endowments for hospitals, asylums, etc., as also from patients who occupy private wards." The reasons presented by Mother Bridgeman, said Pope Pius, were "clear and strong" and "so long as matters stood as they were represented in America, the good sisters could get their support by the ways they have."

The vocation shortage, however, was more complex. Only the hardest, it seemed, could survive the exigencies of the Mercy way of life, with its long hours, long walks, hard work, constant exposure to disease and destitution, unfiltered air, unwashed streets, and the caprices of a climate to which they made no concessions. The deaths of five young Sisters from 1860 to 1864 bore stark witness to this reality. Moreover, their legitimate source of vocations, the Irish element, had not yet opened to them. While the German masses "over the Rhine" daily gained in numbers and social influence, the Cincinnati Irish

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(even those who arrived before the current immigration slump) were either still too rich or too poor to be really helpful. While the German-descended girls entered German-descended orders, the wealthy Irish, unlike the "gentry" in the homeland, had not yet acquired so great a benevolence toward the underprivileged that they willingly surrendered a daughter to religion. Their own struggle for the elemental decencies was too recent.

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**... now was the time to  
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A recruitment visit to Ireland was the only solution. There, Mother Teresa knew, she could replenish her supply of religious subjects, chief export of the oppressed little isle. And now, while all national and civic life was in turmoil, now was the time to solidify their beginnings so that with the peace they might set their sights above mere survival. Mother Teresa and Mother Baptist set out in the fall of 1864 to secure more personnel to continue the works of the Institute. Much mail was exchanged during the six months while the superiors were absent from Cincinnati. Archbishop Purcell in his characteristically pleasant way wrote several letters giving news of the community. He commended the work of Mother Gertrude and "Company," reported that the Sisters are taking good care of the sick, the poor and the McLean Prisoners.

Returning from Ireland the Superiors brought with them one Professed Sister, one novice and Four postulants. As they reached New York they were shocked to learn that President Lincoln had been assassinated on the previous evening. After a brief visit with the New York Mercys, the party reached Cincinnati on April 20, 1865. A special gift sent by Kinsale to its filial house was a manuscript copy of a book just written and at that time unpublished, "A Guide for the Religious Called Sisters of Mercy." This volume was the work of mother Francis Bridgeman. It contained a clear exposition of the Constitution and Customs of the Institute, by a person who knew them well having received personal instructions from Mother Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Mercy Institute. After its publication the following year, 1866, the Guide was used in many Mercy houses.

When the Civil War ended McLean Barracks reverted to the use of the Sisters in the fall of 1865. Renovation was necessary before the building could again serve as the House of Mercy. Scarcely had this

project been completed when a new challenge appeared. The summer of 1866 brought the dread cholera to Cincinnati. Almost immediately the Honorable Mr. Harris, Mayor of Cincinnati, requested the use of the Third Street house to serve as a cholera hospital to meet the exigencies of the epidemic, which was daily on the increase in the city. On August 15, the Sisters who had just concluded their annual retreat entered on their duties in the Cholera Hospital. A temporary dormitory was arranged in one of the convent rooms for the House of Mercy residents.

According to the Annalist, the hospital was placed under the entire direction of the Sisters who carefully attended to the prescriptions of the Medical Staff whose skill and gentlemanly conduct in the discharge of their duty was marked. Day and night the Sisters labored for the spiritual and temporal relief of the plague stricken, many of whom were baptized, reconciled to God in the Sacrament of Penance and died happily. None of the Sisters or the children of the House of Mercy was attacked by the disease, though so many were daily exposed to it. The doctors and the authorities expressed much satisfaction at the manner in which the hospital was conducted by the Sisters.

June, 1864 should have ushered in an era of new leadership for the Cincinnati Community as Mother Teresa's term of office had expired. She would gladly have yielded up the responsibility through the election of a successor, but at that particular time, because of the number of deaths, the community lacked the minimum number of professed Sisters for a canonical election. Mother Teresa was, therefore, returned to office by Archbishop Purcell. On June 6, 1867, the question came up again. This time there were enough votes for a canonical election. As Archbishop Purcell was in Rome, their chaplain Father Whelan presided. The unanimous choice of the community was once again Mother Teresa. Six months later their faithful Father Whelan was dead, after a fall on the winter ice; and the struggle for daily Mass was again a serious problem.

In their scant ten years in Cincinnati, they had observed on their visitations that the people of their neighborhood were easily discouraged from making the trip to the Cathedral or to St. Patrick's for Sunday Mass. Too, the archdiocese was looking to expanding up the hillsides and had no further plans for providing for the deteriorating Bottoms. Furthermore, the several sodalities begun on sycamore street by the Sisters, but by now a city-wide, extra-parochial apostolate under their direction, needed a proper chapel for their spiritual functions. Such a headquarters would also serve an even greater civic need; that of a shrine of reparation to the Sacred Heart. The Sisters decided to build a church. Importantly, out of all this the Sisters fondly hoped that they might improve their own chances of obtaining a permanent resident chaplain with daily Mass and the other blessings one might expect when



entering the convent. Moreover, the Sisters were persuaded that it lay within the range of their Rule to bring the Church to the people.

Whether or not the archbishop suspected that the Sisters might be subtly trying to force his hand in the matter of a chaplain by supplying him with a church, he was enthusiastic about their idea. During March of 1868 he gave them full authorization to build as soon as they had the funds. In a subsequent letter he wrote, "That Church is as much of a want as the idea in which it originated is holy—I long to see it built and in successful operation." Thus reassured, in June of 1869 the Sisters purchased a house and lot known as Tice's Property adjoining the House of Mercy, for a price of nearly ten thousand dollars. Then the fund-raising began.

In September of 1870, ground was broken for the church. Plans of Architect Nash had been approved by the archbishop and his brother, and "His Grace urged the immediate building of the Church, although not one-fourth of the sum required to meet expenses was collected," so the annalist recorded. On the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, the excavations for the basement of the church were begun.

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**“Every sacrifice the Sisters  
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Mary Ellen Evans in her book *The Spirit is Mercy* tells us: "Every sacrifice the Sisters could make, they made; every corner they could cut, they cut; every source of revenue they could legitimately tap, they tapped. Mother Baptist, up to her eyes in the everyday involvements with the sick, poor, jobless, homeless, ignorant, and the potential convert as well as her increasing community responsibility under Mother Teresa, decided to turn out another book as her personal contribution to the fund. At least we may assume that it was Mother Baptist. All we know of the book or its authorship is that on June 30, 1869, a copyright was obtained for *Meditations According to the Method of St. Ignatius on the Sufferings, Life and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ*: Translated by a Sister of Mercy. Mother Baptist seems to have been the "Sister of Mercy" most competent in French, and the one most likely to have turned her recreations to such activity.

While *Meditations* probably enjoyed a good sale, no building fund could be realized on royalties alone.

Fairs were faster, and so on Christmas Eve a fair of three week's duration opened raising about three thousand dollars. Later an exhibit of Munich statuary was displayed in the sodality chapel. A dime was charged for admission. The industrial school, laundry and sewing room, all gave to the fund whatever remained after the costs of operation had been covered. Three and one-half years after the first authorization, the cornerstone was blessed and laid by Archbishop Purcell on September 24, 1871. The Catholic Telegraph in its September 28, 1871, issue reported that, when the church is finished, it promises to be one of the handsomest in the city and that it will be a beautiful monument to the Sisters, perseverance as well as of their love for religion.

The quest for funds continued; and now and again a windfall swept their way, as the Annals reveal.

*About this time [February 2, 1872] Reverend Mother hearing that the celebrated Father Thomas Burke was in Louisville, Ky., asked him to lecture in Cincinnati for the benefit of the new church. Responding positively, he preached at the Cathedral on May 23. He not only realized the sum of \$1,174.89 for the Church of the Atonement, but also allowed Cincinnati the experience of the best there was in sacred eloquence, nineteenth-century style.*

On April 16 Mother Teresa had written to her friend Mother Austin Carroll,

*Our church stands still for want of that necessary evil—money ... I look forward with great pleasure to May twelve months, when I must be let out of office, after eighteen years. I shall have cares and troubles of another kind, as we must go by hard routes to heaven.*

Difficulties started to develop, however, between the Sisters and the Archbishop. A major issue concerned the ownership of the church. As her entry for January 13, Sister Annalist recorded: "Through the instrumentality of Father Costa [chaplain to the Sisters] God so permitting, the Archbishop was urged to require the deeding up of the church to him," and then inserted his letter of the same date:

*The more I have labored to provide for the Church of the Atonement and the Convent and the House of Mercy, the more difficulties seem to increase. I have given the charge of all to one of the best, most zealous and experienced of priests, Rev. Joseph Costa; but he is often "snubbed" by you, to use his own expression, and thwarted in what he proposes for the general good, so as to have been obliged to give way to tears for nearly an entire day, seeing that his good intentions and sacrifices are rendered unavailing. Now I repeat what I have long since proposed:*

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*1st, That you not only have the Church of the Atonement to be a chapel of ease to the Cathedral, or altogether a sort-of parish church, as the former was at the time suggested by Sister Baptist, and make over the deed for this purpose to me, to be held as the other Churches are, for the general and particular good objects we all have in view.*

*2nd, and in this case, I assume all the present debt—the so called House of Mercy being given to the priest or priests for a pastoral residence. That the schools of the congregation be under the control of the priest, as the Pope himself required, or of the Bishop, which amounts to the same thing—and the Sisters allowed a fair compensation for their labor in teaching.*

*3rd, The Sisters to allow the Pastor a portion of his salary for the services he renders them.*

*4th, The Sodalties to be directed by the Pastor, the Sisters aiding in instructing and training the members of those sodalties in piety, Christian knowledge and virtue.*

*With these regulations as a basis for future good understanding and co-operation, the object so long contemplated can, it is hoped, be satisfactorily attained....*

Mother Teresa's prompt reply indicated that in justice to the poor community, they could not think of deeding the property over and that she never willfully did anything to "snub" Father Costa. With their present income of \$100 per month from St. Patrick's School and what they earn from industrial work in the House of Mercy, surely they could not be expected to give up their property for a pastoral residence for Fr. Costa.

After further exchange of views, two objectionable conditions were waived—that the House of Mercy be given for a pastoral residence and that the Sisters pay a salary to the Pastor for services rendered—but the transfer of property was still insisted upon. Knowing that there was no alternative to submission, according to their Acts of Chapter, "At a meeting of the vocals held on February 18th, 1873 in the sacristy of this Convent of the "Divine Will" it was by the majority decided to deed over the "Church of the Atonement" to his Grace the Most Reverend J. B. Purcell according to his desire positively expressed and insisted upon."

On the 5th of March in 1873, the church was deeded to the Archbishop, the Sisters' choir, or side chapel, the cloister connecting it with the convent and the sacristy, not being included in the deed. In Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Mother Austin Carroll wrote, "Later, the Archbishop and his

advisers regretted deeply the deeding of the Church of the Atonement away from the Sisters, as it became responsible, like the other churches, for the diocesan debt. Had they been left in possession, the city would have retained at least one place of worship which could not be brought under the hammer of the auctioneer."

The Sisters and their friends had already invested some \$60,000 in the land and structure. When the consignment of the church to the archdiocese was announced in the daily newspapers, the public was astonished and did not think the edifice, which the Sisters had labored so hard to raise, could be taken from them.

In 1875 Mother Teresa's health was failing rapidly. She had lived hard, in her deep, quiet way, and she knew the toll of the years. Writing to Mother Austin Carroll in 1875, she confided:

*I have been in poor health since July. My dearest friend, God has sent me a salutary warning to remind me to keep my lamp always trimmed and replenished, in the shape of heart disease. This has snatched away my mother, two brothers and a sister. Pray that I may not go suddenly. Your letters and prayers have been a great support to me during our trials. I bless God you prosper so well in the South, and I trust the roots will grow deep as the branches extend. I write with great difficulty. Sometimes I cannot write at all. Always remember me in your pious prayers, my dearly beloved friend.*

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In or out of office, in sickness, or in health it seems that Mother Teresa was the community musician, rehearsing, conducting, accompanying their Masses and hymns not only with religious feeling but with educated taste as well. Although she had not been feeling well, she insisted that she was able to accompany the Christmas Mass. As we learn from the community Obituary Book,

*... and Mother got along nicely until the end of the Gloria. As the Gloria was intoned, she played with all the vigor of her soul and with such expression that one could feel that she was very near*

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*God. At the last chord Mother stopped instantly and had to be removed from the organ bench for she was unable to move. However, restoratives were administered and she revived, but it was the beginning of the illness that took her before another Christmas....*

Mrs. Sarah Peter, now in her seventy-seventh year, died on the 6th of February 1877, six weeks after Christmas. This was another sad experience for Mother Teresa. For Mother Teresa, Mrs. Peter was the mothering spirit of the whole Cincinnati mission.

In July of 1876, Mother Teresa was again elected to the office of Mother Superior. Sometime after this, feeling unequal to her duties, she had written to the Archbishop for permission to retire, but he would not hear of it. It seemed she could no longer go on. She could not even Offer any resistance when her anxious Sisters persuaded her to obey her physician and go away to a cooler environment during the summer. An airy country place was rented on Highland Avenue in Covington, Kentucky. Mother Baptist, Sisters Francis and Agnes resided there with her.

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**“... None will lament the loss of Mother M. Teresa more than the poor and suffering of this city to whom she was a ministering angel ...”**

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Mother Teresa had always been uneasy about the notes of her twelve-thousand dollar debt to the Purcell Bank. She had no way of proving that the debt had been canceled when ownership of the Church of the Atonement was conveyed from her community to the archdiocese. She had only the word of Very Rev. Edward Purcell, administrator of the Bank, that the notes had been canceled. His word was sufficient for her but what might happen to the Sisters in a future in which she would have no part? If she were dying, she was determined not to leave her nuns with a debt that was not owed. Mother Austin Carroll writes of this time:

*Mother Teresa, then on her deathbed, dictated to her devoted friend and helper and successor, Mother Baptist Kane, a document (June 1, 1877), giving an account of the pecuniary affairs of the convent from the first, and declaring, in the strongest terms, that the community was in nowise concerned in the financial difficulties [of the archdiocese] which were the common topic of conversation. This was a last effort to discharge her conscience, and, if possible, save the Sisters from*

*future trouble. Her successor had much annoyance on this head, and was ultimately obliged to make a solemn affidavit before authorized officials, that there had been no pecuniary affairs between the Archbishop and themselves, and that the conditions of the deeding of the church had been strictly adhered to by the Sisters.*

When Archbishop Purcell visited her during her last illness, she again pleaded with him to let her resign, and again she was refused. Toward nightfall of November 21 she received Holy Viaticum and then fell into a coma from which she did not emerge. Her Sisters remained with her all that night and until school opened the next morning. Most of them were in their classrooms when she died that day. It was on November 22, St. Cecilia's day, fittingly enough, at the age of fifty-three, almost thirty years after her religious profession, almost twenty after her arrival in Cincinnati.

The Catholic Telegraph for November 27, 1877, paid tribute to Mother Teresa, "...None will lament the loss of Mother M. Teresa more than the poor and suffering of this city to whom she was a ministering angel. In prison and hospital, in garret and cellar, wherever the needy and suffering are to be found, Mother Teresa's was a familiar presence."

The Annalist writes of Mother Teresa:

*Mother Teresa was undoubtedly one of the great women of the Order, and her works remain to praise her in the gate. Her children rise up to call her blessed. She was not handsome in the face, but had a sweet, intelligent expression, and uncommon intellectual endowments. Her figure was large and graceful, and she was above middle height. As an organist, she ranked among the best in the country. Her most salient characteristic was uprightness, and she was, in every relation of life, the soul of honor and sincerity. She had the name of being severe, and she certainly had nothing in her composition of the softness that leads to self-indulgence, or passes over as trifling, delinquencies that may have serious consequences. But no one made larger allowances for human frailty; often she said of her children: "They are doing the best they can; they mean well; we shall all be perfect when we go to heaven." Large-hearted, generous, and trusting, she combined the simplicity of a child with mature wisdom. She loved the young with special tenderness, and her relations with them were marked with a genial warmth.*

Mother Teresa left few classic utterances. Few of her letters are extant, due largely to the destruction of Mother Austin Carroll's files, none that reveal the depths of her ardent personality or the springs of her silent power. She apparently recoiled from any prominence or publicity. And so, Mary Ellen Evans in The

Spirit of Mercy concludes: "Her only legacy would be the memory of her example; and while to the historian she remains a shadowy, elusive figure, the memory is a living tradition to her spiritual daughters."

Mother Mary Baptist Kane, who for all the years of Mother Teresa's labors had been her faithful companion, now accepted community responsibility and leadership, On January 1, 1878, in a canonical election, Mother Mary Baptist succeeded the Cincinnati Foundress.

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## What is MAST?

### • What is MAST?

MAST is the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology.

### • Can I belong?

Any member of Mercy who is interested in scholarly writing and speaking about theological concerns is welcome. Remember: Theologians and scripture people need scholars in other fields (history, sociology, philosophy, english, etc., etc., etc.) to keep them in the real world! So, if you are in another field and are inclined to interdisciplinary work with theologians, please consider membership in MAST.

### • When does MAST meet?

The annual meeting is held just after the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the location is determined by the city in which the CTSA is held.

### • Are there dues?

Yes membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Janet Ruffing, MAST treasurer, 2043 Hone Avenue, Bronx, NY, 10461.

### • When and where is the meeting this year?

This year, MAST will hold its annual meeting in New York from Monday, June 12th to noon Wednesday, June 14th.

### • What goes on at these meetings?

Plenary sessions and special interest sessions are arranged based on participants' ideas gathered at the previous meeting. An executive committee plans each year's meeting sending out an agenda to those on the mailing list in April.

### • How do I get on the mailing list?

Call or write: Maryanne Stevens, RSM  
Executive Director  
9411 Ohio Street  
Omaha, NE 68134  
(402) 280-2505

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# Mercy Presence in Argentina

Mary Isabel MacDermott, R.S.M.

We could allow our imagination to make a backward trip to reach a moment in history, 150 years ago, and come into contact with a reality which has not been buried by the passing years, but lives in the present, and will continue into the future "though it be not ours to see"—the stark reality of human suffering, crying out for mercy.

Through this prayerful, joyful, sisterly celebration, we are honoring the great women of our Mercy family who braved stormy seas, long before air travel was even dreamed of, in answer to that call from the poor, the sick, the ignorant ... their own fellow-countrymen and women in exile.

As a Mercy from Argentina, and as a descendant from those Irish immigrants, I shall try to bring here today, to this beloved Mercy family, the figure of Mother Mary Evangelista Fitzpatrick, who led the first Mercy Foundation in Argentina.

Why were the Sisters of Mercy called to his vision, his practical advice, his unerring judgment of the situation. He saw a tremendous need of education of the children, of care of the orphans, of their sick, and of providing for unmarried girls who came to Argentina in search of work.

After consultation with the Bishop of Buenos Aires, Dr. Escalada, he applied to Baggot Street. Where else? His request was immediately granted. The volunteers were appointed and on the Feast of the Magi, January 6, 1856, Mother Mary Evangelista, named Superior by the Archbishop of Dublin, set sail with her brave little band of six:

Mother Mary Baptist, Assistant  
Sister Mary Joseph Griffin, Professed  
Sister Mary Catherine Flanagan, Professed  
Sister Mary Rose Foley, Novice  
Sister Margaret Coffey, Postulant  
Sister Martha Maloney, Postulant

and arrived in Buenos Aires on the 24th of February, where they were met by Fr. Fahy and a group of friends; the following day they were visited by the Bishop.

## Difficulties

Like most Mercy beginnings, right from Catherine's day, the Sisters, though welcomed and admired for their works, came up against legal tangles. The "walking nuns" of Dublin found themselves to be the first uncloistered religious women seen in the streets of Buenos Aires (cloistered orders had a legal status accorded them by Spain long before colonial days).

After endless legal "haggling", in which Fr. Fahy proved himself an experienced and brilliant advocate, and Mother Evangelista firmly defended the rights of

the Sisters to respond to the call to serve the people, a decree was finally issued on December 3, 1857, by which members of religious congregations could remain in Argentina as private individuals with all the rights of Argentine citizens. This decree set a precedent for the numerous active religious congregations of men and women established ever since in our country.

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**"The charitable work of the Sisters is for all society, without distinction of country or nationality."**

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This troublesome business of getting legal recognition and permission to carry out the works for which they had come, did not deter or detain Mother Evangelista or her companions. The very day they arrived, Fr. Fahy put them in charge of the Irish infirmary, or hospital for Irish immigrants, and from then on they extended their visitation of the poor and sick in their homes. As Mother Evangelista, writing to the Bishop, states, "The charitable work of the Sisters is for all society, without distinction of country or nationality."

In the year 1858, Buenos Aires was stricken by the yellow fever, the people who were able to do so fled in terror from the city. The government appealed to the Sisters and the following quotation from a weekly publication, *Religion*, speaks of their response:

*Some of them (the Sisters) headed by Mother Evangelista arrived at the (post)house immediately, giving themselves over, with their whole attention, to make the place ready, and to receive and care for the victims, of both sexes, sent to them. Everybody admired their selflessness, their activity, their readiness to undertake the administration of the establishment, the very name of which inspired so much horror (Lazaretto) ...*

Evangelista was persevering. While working practically around the clock tending to the sick and dying, teaching, helping the needy, she continued to clarify to the government officials the purposes of the congregation:

*"...the instruction of young women in a manner suitable for all states and conditions of life ... the assistance of the sick of both sexes, the visitation of prisons and houses of correction, in order to teach the Gospel maxims of morality and to apply*

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*remedies for both spiritual and corporal infirmities and all that the practice of Christian charity includes...*" (Ussher, Santiago. *Sisters of Mercy*, Appendix)

In the year 1858 the Sisters moved into their convent, recently built on the large plot of land purchased by Fr. Fahy. On the same site the following buildings had also been erected: the new Irish hospital, the Irish orphanage, the home for Irish working girls, the free school (also attended by the children living within the area), the boarding school for girls living on farms or ranches very far from Buenos Aires the chapel, which was opened to public worship in 1859.

And the works of Mercy extended. In 1865, St. Peter and Paul School was opened in the town of Chascomús, about 80 miles from Buenos Aires. It was closed in 1870 due to an epidemic of cholera which drove the people further inland. The Sisters, led by M. Evangelista, were not to be deterred: in 1872 they opened St. Joseph School in the city of Mercedes, about 100 miles from Buenos Aires, which was closed in the year 1880 when the Sisters left Argentina. It was a large building; part of it stands today, forming part of the present St. Patrick School, owned by the Pallotine Fathers who bought the property some years after the Sisters had left.

We now come to what is a painful part of our history: the Sisters decided to leave Argentina. This drastic step was taken due to many reasons. The rulers of the country were influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution, and most of them were free masons, free thinkers, and their general attitude was anti-clerical, which meant anti-Catholic. Fr. Fahy had died in 1871, a victim of the yellow fever, and the Sisters were left much to their own devices. The economic contributions, which Fr. Fahy was always ready to obtain, decreased as the years passed, and so the Sisters had to support the institutions practically single-handed. The Irish hospital could no longer be supported, and the Sisters left it in the hands of a board of trustees who were unable to support it for long. It now took in English, Scotch and Americans, and many benefactors refused to continue contributing.

The climax to these difficulties was the unleashing of a fierce campaign against the Church, against religious communities, especially against the Jesuits. This was planned by the authorities and executed by hot-headed university students who incited and headed thousands of the rabble. Riots in the streets were very frequent but, on February 28, 1875, the mob attacked the Bishop's palace and burned to the very ground the Jesuit College of El Salvador, just half a block away from the Sisters' convent. The community became really alarmed and it was decided to leave the country. But Mother Evangelista found many obstacles in attempting to carry out the decision. It seems paradoxical that the Sisters had to fight their way in, so to

speaking, in order to stay in the country; now they had to fight their way out. The Bishop of Buenos Aires, Dr. Aneiros, refused permission to let them go. He loved the Sisters, whom he called the gem of his Diocese. (Leaves from the Annals, Chapter IV)

It seems evident that not all the Sisters agreed with M. Mary Evangelista's view of the situation; perhaps those born in Argentina saw the campaign more as a threat than as actual jeopardy. In a letter by Mother Mary Stanislaus Harrington, giving an account of the decision to depart, she says, "The Superioress with her Council decided to leave the country and establish elsewhere..."

There is no doubt regarding what Mother Evangelista suffered over these five or six years, not alone because of the events already described, but, above all, fear for the safety and lives of her Sisters. At that time she corresponded with Mercy communities here in the U.S.A. (New Orleans, Mobile, Pensacola), and, when trouble arose, she was invited to come to the United States. However, she decided to stay in Buenos Aires and travel to Dublin to consult Cardinal Cullen, who had sent them to Argentina. On arrival, she learned that Cardinal Cullen had died. His successor, Dr. McCabe, graciously offered advice and help; Dr. Moran, Bishop of Ossory, and later Bishop of Sidney, offered to take to Rome a petition from her, which proved unnecessary to present since, in the meantime, the Bishop of Buenos Aires had given his consent.

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## **"God writes straight with crooked lines."**

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There is a saying in Spanish, "Dios escribe derecho sobre líneas torcidas," which goes, "God writes straight with crooked lines." This proved true with regard to M. Evangelista's momentous decision to withdraw from Argentina. At the time of her consultation in Ireland, Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide was in Ireland, too, seeking Sisters of Mercy for his Diocese. He approached Evangelista and his offer was accepted. A new mission-field was opening up for this group of Mercies. We could ask here if this did not mean for M. Evangelista the fulfillment of the Gospel words: "When you are not welcome in one town, shake the dust off your feet and go elsewhere..."

In the meantime, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires sent a letter agreeing to their departure from Buenos Aires. On Mother Evangelista's return to Buenos Aires, she proceeded to settle all material and legal matters in order to hand over the property of Rio Samba Street to a Board of trustees, and the property in Mercedes she entrusted to a small group of gentle-

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men. On February 8, 1880, the community of 24 Sisters of Mercy left Buenos Aires, bound for Australia via England. They arrived in Adelaide on May 3rd only to find that there was enough work there for 12 sisters. So, twelve remained in Adelaide with Mother Mary Evangelista and the other twelve, led by mother Mary Baptist MacDonnell, went to Mount Cambier, about 300 miles distant.

### **Mother Mary Evangelista Fitzpatrick**

Having closed the first chapter of our Mercy history in Argentina, and having placed Mother Evangelista and her community within the context of the social and political history of the country at that time, the moment has come, I think, to look at her life, her role in Mercy history and her rich personality. Born in Dublin, Christmas Eve, 1822, of exemplary parents, she grew up in a truly Christian family: pious, charitable, educated and committed to worthy causes. Her father strove, with Daniel O'Connell, for Catholic Emancipation. One of her brothers fell, as missionary chaplain, at Khyber Pass. Another sacrificed his life for his flock in a distant western state. From her very childhood she was remarkable for her piety, her love for the poor and helpless. Nobody was surprised when, at the age of 22, she turned her back upon the allurements of the society of her day and entered the community at Baggot Street. Mother Cecilia Marmion received her and Mother Vincent Whitty, the last Sister professed by Catherine McAuley, was her mistress of novices.

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**Besides being intrepid in the face of the unknown, of hostility, misunderstanding, disloyalty of friends, there is another trait to be admired in M. Evangelista: her sensitivity.**

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During the cholera, which struck Dublin in 1849, she was the life and soul of the Sisters who ministered to the victims in the camp or shed hospitals of Glasnevin. Her abnegation was an inspiration to her fellow-workers — the fear of contracting the dreadful disease did not diminish their selfless dedication. Appointed Superior of the group of Sisters chosen to undertake the mission requested by Argentina, she proved her quality of leadership: to brave a trip of thousands of miles, to an unknown country, demanded courage and trust in Divine Providence.

From what we know of the difficulties and obsta-

cles to the Sisters' presence and service in Buenos Aires, we cannot but admire her perseverance. No weakling she, no hesitant woman, she fought against the red tape of her day, all the while she and her Sisters, with their hand to the plow, continued to look and to move ahead. When Buenos Aires was hit by the yellow fever, or cholera, she and her Sisters stretched their care of the victims to unbelievable limits. Some of the Sisters, and she herself, contracted the dreadful disease, but recovered. From letters of hers to Sisters and friends, we gather that Mother M. Evangelista never felt too secure in Buenos; political upheaval, riots, led her to say in a letter dated 1877.

We are now here over twenty one years and, so far from being securely established, or flourishing, the probabilities are that we shall be sent away in the end. The free masons are most powerful and are laboring hard against Religious...

She enumerates many other difficulties: unexpected lack of support from her fellow countrymen, inability to reach friends living on sheep or cattle ranches hundreds of miles away. These were enough to discourage the bravest, yet she carried on the works engaged in. In the meantime, during all these trying times, she was fighting the interior battle: What should she do? What was God asking? To continue in this uncertainty, or to make a break and leave the country? Evangelista's faith in Providence upheld her in this struggle. We have seen through her letters how she sought counsel before making the final decision.

Yet the outcome of these years of prayer, tireless work and uncertainty about the future, was truly providential. Little did she and her companion, S. M. Claver Kenny, dream that when they arrived in Dublin there would be waiting for them there an invitation to go on a new foundation. Mother Evangelista received this invitation as a direct gift from the hand of G through the mediation of Bishop Reynolds. In this, once more, we admire her courage and her faith. To attempt an understanding of the situation of M. Evangelista and her community, we have to forget our present day facilities of travel and communication and take stock of the limitations under which she worked. Besides being intrepid in the face of the unknown, of hostility, misunderstanding, disloyalty of friends, there is another trait to be admired in M. Evangelista: her sensitivity. We read in her letters how deeply grateful she felt for sympathy shown to her, for demonstrations of hospitality, for concern regarding the plight of her community.

She was deeply committed to her community. Her letters speak of her great concern for them. While in Ireland in 1879, in a letter to Bishop Moran, she says: "I received a telegram from my poor sisters..." In a further letter we read: "... as there will be a delay ... I think it will be better for me to return to Buenos Aires ... I cannot bear to be away from my Sisters in their present difficulties..." Writing from Australia, she

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recalls how her health had been affected by anxiety of mind and says, "...Often, when ill there, I felt I could gladly lay down my life, but for the thought of leaving, my beloved Sisters so unprotected in such a country. Now, thank God, I can die with an easy mind on that head..."

Another remarkable virtue was the radicality of her total consecration to God in the religious life. This unquestionable fidelity to that consecration appears in a letter written while in Dublin seeking counsel regarding the removal of the community from Argentina: "... I will ask His Grace's advice about going to Adelaide and whatever he says I will do, it seems to me there is no real opening in Ireland and there is in Australia, although we may naturally like Ireland better, yet, as we renounced our country and friends for God, there is no use in going back to these feelings now ... In Dr. Dorian's diocese there would be work for 4 or 5 ... I will write the Sisters and let them choose, but I know the greater part of them would not mind at all where they go, so that they could do good, and have Irish priests and Bishops."

Mother Evangelista spent six years of work and progress in Australia. On June 29, 1886, while apparently cured of a short illness, and in the presence of the Bishop who had come to visit her, she suddenly said: "Bless me, my Lord, I am dying." He placed his indulgenced crucifix in her hands and gave her absolution as she closed her eyes in death, without a struggle, as if going to sleep. Mother Evangelista had imbibed Catherine McAuley's spirit: courage in the face of obstacles, love for her community, forgetfulness of self in her abnegated service in Mercy, prayerful discernment of the will of God in undertaking or abandoning missions, joyful acceptance of crosses, cordiality and family spirit with her Sisters.

## **Part II: The Second Foundation**

Ten years after leaving Buenos Aires, the Sisters of Mercy came back. Although rumors had been heard that the Sisters might be leaving the country, the actual withdrawal came as a rude awakening, especially to those who had taken a superficial view of their duty to support the work of the Sisters. The departure had been considered a real calamity and the people, supported by Archbishop Aneiros, started a campaign to get them to return. Archbishop Aneiros wrote to Mother Mary Baptist at Mount Cambier, urging her to come. Again, it is Mother Stanislaus Harrington who tells us what happened at this time:

*At first no one thought of accepting the invitation, but our friends in Buenos Aires, including the Archbishop, Dr. Aneiros, were so insistent that at length Mother Mary Baptist put the question before the community, some of whom agreed at once to return."*

However, when the decision was made known to

Archbishop Reynolds, he absolutely refused to allow them to leave Australia. But, as Archbishop Aneiros had applied to Rome, the Congregation of the Propaganda Fidei advised Archbishop Reynolds to allow six Sisters to return to Buenos, and he, reluctant but obedient, yielded. Six Sisters of Mercy, under the leadership of Mother Mary Baptist MacDonnell, left on May 21, 1890 with the blessing of the Archbishop. There is a detailed account of the long trip back to Buenos Aires, where they were warmly welcomed by the people and the Archbishop, August 9, 1890. It was really a new beginning.

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## **The sisters continued to visit the sick and poor in their homes, but the emphasis of their apostolate was on education.**

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None of their former convents were available. Mother Baptist rented a house on August 18, 1890, and opened another house for women on September 24 of the same year. Within the year the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who had been in charge of the school and other works from the time the Mercies left the country, willingly handed over the building and our Sisters joyfully found themselves once more in their own old Rio Bamba convent (January 7, 1891). Since the Rio Bamba property had passed into the hands of the newly-founded Irish Catholic Association (who had obtained juridical rights on June 5, 1883), the Sisters started looking for a definite site from which to recommence their works. A plot was acquired on 24 de Noviembre corner of Estados Unidos street, and here, on August 15, 1897, the building, which until 1988 was our Mother House, was blessed. It later extended to include the school on all levels including a boarding-school.

The sisters continued to visit the sick and poor in their homes, but the emphasis of their apostolate was on education. There was a very strong, historical reason for this emphasis: the influence of anti-clericalism on the part of the authorities regarding education permeated the final enactment of National Law 1420, in 1884. It was not anti-religious, but demanded what was called lay education, under the complete control of the government. Public schools as well as private schools were bound by the same rulings. The name of God had to be omitted from the textbooks. However, there was enough leeway to impart a solid Christian formation in schools run by religious congregations. We continued along this path for over 70 years.

Our sense of security that we were acting in fidelity



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ty to our charism was rudely shaken, not by the government, but by the rather turbulent aftermath of Vatican II, which had mandated religious congregations to go back to their historical roots, to the lives and spirit of their founders, and to ask themselves the hard, challenging question: Where would our foundresses stand today? What answer would they offer to problems besetting society in the second part of the twentieth century?

The Sisters of Mercy had come to Argentina to respond to the care of the poor, sick and ignorant, especially among the Irish immigrants. By the second half of the present century, we found ourselves mainly serving the middle class as well as the poor; we mingled them, for our institutions were never selective. We prayed, we reflected, we dialogued, and asked ourselves the hard question: If Mother Evangelista and her group arrived in Argentina today, where would they carry out their service in Mercy? In Buenos Aires? In smaller cities inland? Where are the poor today? And what are their crying needs? The answer was evident and demanding. The poor are the marginated, those living below the poverty line, the aboriginals in the backwoods, and the millions surviving in precarious conditions in "barrios" surrounding the large cities.

As we prayed and dialogued, we looked out and beyond and began our new form of service to the poor. We started to open convents in the areas where we served and we tried to live as these people live. These new mission-fields, this Mercy presence among the poor, meant leaving our Institutions.

We still own St. Ethnea, but for some years we have been sharing, in greater depth, our Mercy charism with the lay faculty, who have gradually begun to take over important positions of orientation and administration. We still have a Sister heading the institution, with other Sisters animating education on a part-time basis. Education at St. Ethnea is impregnated with a preferential option for the poor. Those involved — faculty, administrators, pupils, parents — support and participate in the works of the Sisters among the poor.

#### **Mother Mary Baptist MacDonnell**

Since we consider Mother Mary Baptist MacDonnell the second foundress of the Mercy Sisters in Argentina, I would like to pay her the tribute of a short sketch here. Born in Cape Town, South Africa,

where her father was an army doctor, she was educated at Baggot Street, where she entered when she was twenty. One of the Superiors of the early days, she was serving as such in Booterstown when she volunteered for the foundation in Buenos Aires. In 1856, and was appointed Mother Assistant to Mother Mary Evangelista by Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin.

A brilliant, cultured woman, she was a worthy daughter of Mother McAuley in every way. It took courage to leave Ireland in 1856, before she was thirty years old, and embark on a foundation in a foreign country, with a different climate, a different culture and a different language. But to return to Argentina, when she was sixty four, knowing the conditions she would be faced with, was an act of true heroism. In four short years she had begun the works of Mercy and planned the building of a motherhouse, novitiate and school which would be the future Mater Misericordia.

When Mother Baptist was almost blind and knew she was nearing death, she received the visit of Dr. Aneiros, who esteemed and loved her. She had nursed him years before when he was very ill. On March 16, 1894, after taking leave of the Sisters and the orphans, saying a cheering, tender word to each, she gave up her soul to God.

On St. Patrick's Day, March 17th, her funeral Mass was celebrated in the school chapel and her legion of friends and admirers bade her farewell. Her death was keenly felt, not only by the Sisters, but also by all who had loved and admired this noble religious woman, who had struggled and sacrificed her life for the poor, the uneducated children and the people of Buenos Aires. Even a non-Catholic newspaper spoke of her as "a most gentle, gracious Christian, she leaves her calling full of years and good works, but her memory will remain ever green in a circle far wider than the Church she loved and served so well."

In conclusion, it is fitting to mention an important landmark in our Mercy history in Argentina, and that is our joining the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. Under Sister Mary Bernadette O'Leary we became part of the Province of Detroit of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in 1962. Thus, today, we belong today to that large Mercy family, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, which is the reason why I joyfully and gratefully share with all of you this sisterly celebration of thanksgiving.

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# Mary Baptist Russell of California

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

She did it all. This short, concise phrase best describes the range and diversity of services undertaken by California's pioneer of Mercy, Mary Baptist Russell. Katherine Russell never met Catherine McAuley but she shared her passion for the poor and zeal for the works of mercy. Like Mother McAuley, she would be known as "Mother of the Poor". So alike in heart and spirit, the two women were worlds apart in background and contexts for ministry. One would be revered as the courageous, visionary woman who gave birth to the Order of Mercy; the other as a pioneer foundress living out the Mercy charism amidst the wild rawness of Gold Rush society. The bond of their spirits is the legacy of Mercy in California.

Kate Russell was uniquely prepared by temperament and education to face the rigors of the Western life in the latter part of the 1800's. She was by all accounts intelligent, practical, compassionate and lively. Her brother, Rev. Matthew Russell, S.J., describes her in these words: "She was at home the comfort and resource of everyone in the house. Always cheerful and equal in temper, kind, self-forgetful, thoughtful for others, helpful, untiring in her round of house duties; all loved her and looked to her in their pains and pleasures, and she had a heart for all. She was a comfortable little housekeeper, a good mender of torn garments, and she got employment especially at the stocking-basket."<sup>1</sup>

The Russells provided their children with the best education possible. Instructed by private tutor and within private schools, Kate's foundation in philosophy, the arts, French and the sciences gave her an intense love for education. Her skill as a teacher was immediately put to the test upon her entry into Kinsale. Sister Mary Howley reflects: "While she was a postulant, she taught the novices, but was always humble and made nothing of it."<sup>2</sup>

Margaret Russell, Katherine's mother, saw to it that all her daughters were skilled in the practical arts of life. Early on she practiced the custom of turning over the "keys of office" to each daughter. During her month of office the young Russell would be in charge of ordering, meal planning, maintenance and all the other tasks necessary to run a large household. The skills learned within the Russell home by Kate and her sisters Elizabeth and Sarah would all be put to use as Mercy foundresses.

Katherine Russell was born in Newry in 1829. Due to her father's poor health the family moved to Killowen by the Sea. Here in 1841, the year of Catherine McAuley's death, she made her first communion. In the seclusion of the countryside, she developed a deep love of nature and of the sea. This idyllic childhood was brought to a close in her teens by the

death of her father Arthur. Mrs. Russell moved the family back to Newry. That decision came in 1845, the year when the potato blight was first recognized in Ireland.

The starvation and poverty birthed by the famine called forth Margaret Russell's deep compassion for those in distress. Kate joined her mother's efforts. Matthew tells us: "Between visiting the sick and poor in their wretched homes, and collecting from door to door the weekly subscriptions of those who were a little better off, and also preparing her share of the clothing which was distributed to the poor, Kate's whole time was devoted to this terrible crisis..."<sup>3</sup> Three years later Kate sought entry into the Mercy Order in Kinsale.

In Kinsale that Katherine met Mother Frances Bridgeman who would become her lifelong mentor. Kate, now Sister Mary Baptist, found religious practice at Kinsale exact, vigorous and generous. In this environment her natural love for the poor and drive to help others in need flourished. She was cherished by the community and years later one of her Kinsale sisters reflected: "All I have to say of her is that she was the most perfect being, in every sense of the word, that in my judgment I ever came across."<sup>4</sup>

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**While the adventures  
and achievements of  
Mother Baptist' life are  
colorful and compelling, her  
attraction rests in her model  
of prophetic witness.**

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Such lavish praise needs flesh to be believable. It is supplied by Sister M. Elizabeth, another member of the community. "...what I admired most in her was her cordial, affectionate manner in the Community, and her great love of the poor. She could never see a Sister in any difficulty without trying to help her out of it, even at her own great inconvenience, so that many a time she got herself into difficulties in her effort to get others out of them...Any little extra time or freedom she might chance to have, was always devoted to helping or relieving the poor in some way or other. She did many things in this way that others would not venture, and that were not always approved of, but she did them with so much simplicity and good faith that no one could blame her."<sup>5</sup>

While the adventures and achievements of Mother

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Baptist' life are colorful and compelling, her attraction rests in her model of prophetic witness. A review of her life from her entry into Kinsale to her death in 1898 focuses five major themes which are core to the Mercy tradition: (1) her commitment to the betterment of women; (2) her pattern of evangelization through merciful service; (3) her priority on relational ministry as pathway to conversion and transformation; (4) her passion for the poor and suffering, (5) her constancy in following what she discerned to be the will of God. The events of her life weave these five elements together in a vivid portrait of Mercy.

During her childhood and early religious formation in Kinsale, Katherine met poverty, despair, famine and cholera. Her life had schooled her in compassion. Her education prepared her mind for analysis and reading the signs of the time; her temperament made her practical, able to see the humor in things and flexible. Nothing prepared her for what she was to find in California.

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## **Gallagher's description moved the hearts of the entire Kinsale community and twenty nine sisters volunteered for the mission despite the hardships it involved.**

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When Father Hugh Gallagher, a delegate of California's Bishop Joseph Alemany, arrived at Kinsale seeking apostles for the West, his stories seemed beyond belief. He painted a picture of lawlessness, disregard for common civility and abandonment of religious practice. The Church's condition could best be described as dismal. Clergy was scarce, religious instruction minimal. There was no one to care for the needy poor. Fearing her sisters would be scalped, Mother Bridgeman was not inclined to accept the mission. Compassion overcame fear.

Gallagher's description moved the hearts of the entire Kinsale community and twenty nine sisters volunteered for the mission despite the hardships it involved. Mother Frances Bridgeman had the difficult task of selecting the final eight from the willing volunteers. Those selected included Sister Mary Baptist and Mother Frances' own beloved aunt, Sister Mary DeSales Reddan. It was only when Father Gallagher asked which of the group would be its superior that the twenty-five year old Mary Baptist discovered she would be its leader. The rest of the pioneer company numbered Sister Mary Francis Benson, thirty-eight, Sister Mary Bernard O'Dwyer, twenty-six, Sister Mary Howley, twenty-nine, Sister Mary Gabriel

Brown, twenty-five, Sister Mary Paul Beechinor, nineteen and Sister Martha McCarthy, twenty-six.

Preparations for the journey had to be completed in a few short weeks. Originally it was hoped that the party would leave on the Arctic. Plans did not go as quickly as hoped and the party was rebooked on the Canada. The delay was to prove providential for the Arctic was lost at sea with all aboard. After a short stop in New York where Mother Agnes O'Connor's sisters introduced the contingent to the ways of America, the party started the long trip to San Francisco. Quickly the sisters learned that the new country was not Ireland.

The trip over the isthmus was made by wagon. Although the accommodations arranged for them were the best available, housing was primitive in nature. Danger came in the form of insects, weather, runaway horses and lack of sanitation. After nearly losing the four Sisters of Notre Dame in the party over a steep cliff, they arrived on the Pacific side of the isthmus. Here they were greeted by native peoples who swooped them up and carried them to the waiting Cortez. Father Gallagher, hoping to lessen the shock, arranged to have the scantily clothed natives wear pantaloons and shirts while carrying the sisters out to the ship for the thirteen day journey to San Francisco.

### **Service to Women a Critical Need**

It was an apt introduction to a world that none of the sisters had imagined. The plight of women in the San Francisco of the mid 1850's was jarring. The year before the arrival of Mercy to the West Coast, sixty French women had been auctioned in the city. They were sold to any person who could pay the price of their passage on the ship.<sup>6</sup> The ratio of women to men in the city was one to twelve. The rapid exodus from the city when rumors of gold strikes surfaced left both women and children stranded without any means of support. Four times within a short five year span the city would experience major disruptions as gold hungry folks raced to the hills. Over fifteen thousand persons left San Francisco in a single incident. Into this milieu the Mercy community was to bring shelter and protection.

Sister Frances Benson writing in July, 1859, describes the situation: "You, innocent Irish nuns, could never imagine the sinfulness we have to contend with here...You may grow old and descend into your grave without ever imagining there could be such depravity as we have to deplore."<sup>7</sup> Sister Frances continues her letter relating what has been done in so short a time. "Within the precincts of our Hospital are included Convent, House of Mercy, Orphanage, Magdalen Asylum and an office for procuring situations for servants, here called 'help'...Add to these...the reconciling of quarreling husbands and wives, rescuing unfortunate creatures from self-destruction, snatching others from the verge of degra-

dation, and exciting to contrition those already fallen.

"In a short space, the House of Mercy, for destitute women of good character, received and provided for six hundred women. The Widows' Home too is quite populous...In the office for procuring situations for women, nine thousand, four hundred and forty-eight were provided for in a few years."<sup>8</sup> While the statistics left by Sister Frances are impressive, they are only part of the story.

Upon the sisters arrival in San Francisco, it was immediately apparent that shelter needed to be provided for women of good character if they were to escape exploitation. It was established in 1855. Then came the aged who had no one to look after them or provide for their needs. Baptist welcomed them in and longed for the time when she would be able to build a home where they would be able to finish their lives in dignity and warmth. It was a young Protestant woman seeking escape from her circumstances that led to the establishment of the Magdalen Asylum. Amanda Taylor arrived on the convent doorstep seeking refuge even in a coal hole rather than to remain in her situation. Although not yet ready to open a refuge, Baptist welcomed her in and all those who followed. Soon a House of Refuge was opened and many women passed through its shelter and re-entered society, marrying and leading productive lives. Some became consecrated penitents. The work of the sisters prompted the government officials to ask them to add the care of delinquent girls to their already extensive works of mercy. This they did.

Whether abandoned wives and mothers, prostitutes or naive young girls in need of protection, Mary Baptist saw to it that the women who came to her for assistance found not only material relief but education, support and spiritual guidance. She was ready to provide any service that would end their suffering and marginalization. Her reliance upon the providence of God prompted her to respond first and worry about financing the project later. This characteristic mode of responding to suffering prompted Bishop Alemany to remind her that your "heart is bigger than your purse."<sup>9</sup>

#### **Evangelization Through Merciful Service**

While meeting the needs of San Francisco's poor and weak, Mary Baptist was challenged by massive health crises. San Francisco was a health disaster waiting to erupt. There were no health regulations governing entry to the port city. Diseases carried by ships, passengers had easy access. The dark ages of nursing remained in deep night within the city. The custom of San Francisco was to "rent out" their dependent sick to the lowest bidder. This policy caused the sick poor to be exploited by those seeking to make quick and easy money. Paying the lowest wages possible, persons were hired who had neither the skills nor the heart to care for the sick and dying. At the time of the

sisters arrival, the sick did everything possible to avoid the county hospital for it usually meant sure death.

The ministry to the sick undertaken by the sisters was in sharp contrast to this picture. After their arrival on December 8, 1854, the first ministry undertaken by the sisters was visitation of the sick and poor in their homes and in the county hospital. The first visitation revealed the state of health care. On January 4, 1855 the sisters were asked to visit the home of a woman who had just died. While kneeling to pray for the woman they realized she was not dead. After sending for the priest, they revived the woman and sent her to the county hospital. Mary Baptist deliberately rented a house near the hospital. Daily the sisters visited the sick bringing what comfort they could to the patients. Basics such as pillows and bedding were luxuries to some.

The city was in the process of building a new hospital which was to be finished in the fall of 1855. The sisters, needing more room, decided to buy the old facility. This was done in July, 1855, and the city became their tenant. The purchase price was thirteen thousand dollars. By September cholera visited the city brought to the port by the Uncle Sam. A new episode in the story of the San Francisco community was about to be written.

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## **Bigotry and prejudice had been unexpected factors facing the sisters right after their arrival in San Francisco.**

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Bigotry and prejudice had been unexpected factors facing the sisters right after their arrival in San Francisco. The trip on the Cortez which had seemed uneventful planted a seed of discontent among the fellow passengers who resented the treatment given to the religious party. James King, an ardent Know-Nothing supporter, attacked the sisters in the Bulletin. They were accused of being "hard drinkers" and sabbath breakers.<sup>10</sup> The editorials fanned the embers of religious bigotry and the community was at risk. Only the intervention of Captain Thomas Cooper would quell the flames. He wrote an eloquent defense of the sisters and condemned the false reports. Momentarily things were quiet.

Public opinion underwent a major transformation as a result of the sisters' service during the cholera crisis. Most were experienced in the ways of the disease and knew what remedies would be most beneficial. Mary Baptist offered the assistance of her sisters. The city readily accepted. The Daily News carried the following description of their labors: "We visited yester-

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day the patients in the hospital; a more horrible and ghastly sight we have seldom witnessed. In the midst of this scene of sorrow, pain, anguish, and danger were ministering angels who disregarded everything to aid their distressed fellow-creatures. The Sisters of Mercy...did not stop to inquire whether the poor sufferers were Protestants or Catholics, Americans or foreigners, but with the noblest devotion applied themselves to their relief...The idea of danger never seems to have occurred to these noble women; they heeded nothing of the kind."<sup>11</sup>

The merciful service and witness of the sisters seemed to have restored religious harmony for a short time. Such currents go in waves and it would resurface when the crisis was forgotten. In response to their accomplishments during the epidemic the city offered the sisters the contract for the care of its dependent sick. It was October, 1855. By March James King again began to attack the manner in which the hospital was conducted. Headlines such as "INHUMAN TREATMENT OF AN IDIOT, BAD QUARTERS... STARVING...FILTH"<sup>12</sup> flowed from the *Bulletin*. King finally demanded that a Grand Jury visit each convent to determine if its members were held against their will.

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## **Protestant and Catholic patients alike rose to the defense of the sisters and King was forced by public opinion to soften his approach.**

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Protestant and Catholic patients alike rose to the defense of the sisters and King was forced by public opinion to soften his approach. Even he had to write: "The high character we hear on all sides from both Catholics and Protestants of the Reverend Mother Superior of the Sisters of Mercy has strengthened our belief that it is not to them but to Father Gallagher alone is to be attributed all the atrocities committed at the Hospital..."<sup>13</sup> The continuing attack of the hospital led Mother Baptist to quietly invite the Grand Jury to investigate all charges. They returned a public report not only vindicating the hospital's management by the Sisters but citing them as one of the city's three services of distinction. The five month period under examination revealed that 527 patients were served plus another 254 treated but not admitted.

Even this report did not silence King but a bullet did. He was shot by James Casey a man whose reputation the editor had attacked in the *Bulletin*. The inflammatory editorializing that preceded the murder gave rise to the vigilante period of 1856.<sup>14</sup> The young

community was fearful for they had been the focus of many of King's attacks. The mood of the vigilantes was unpredictable and volatile. Members of the group drilled outside the convent bringing a sense of constant danger.

The atmosphere was described in a letter written by a woman of the time. "Many can neither eat nor sleep; they say the law and order people will plunder and burn the city and there is no knowing what will become of the women and children. I assure you it looks very like war to go through our streets in the evening and see thousands of bayonets glimmering in the moonlight, going through their different evolutions, everyone showing grim determination to carry their point."<sup>15</sup> To criticize the activities of the Committee of Vigilance was to risk arrest.

The vigilante period passed but the challenges of working with a city government that lacked integrity and responsible leadership did not. The city defaulted on all its financial commitments relating to the hospital. For nine months the sisters bore the entire cost of caring for the city's sick. Mary Baptist, practical and direct, wrote to the Board of Supervisors and named the reality. The sisters could no longer bear the cost of the city's financial responsibility. Service could only be continued if the terms of the contract were honored. The city failed to respond and Mother Russell terminated the contract. This hard learned lesson would make her politically astute in later dealings with government.

Upon the opening of a new county hospital by San Francisco, the Sisters opened their own hospital, St. Mary's. This facility, opened in 1857, was the first Catholic hospital on the West Coast. It would become the center of all Mother Baptist's social ministry and a refuge for those in need but the hospital would soon be too small and the building too dilapidated to repair. Plans were initiated for a new building. The new St. Mary's was completed in January, 1862. It was to be the only Catholic hospital in San Francisco for over thirty years.

A second major health crisis hit the city in 1868. It was the black smallpox. The disease was so contagious and so frightening that even ministers would not visit their dying parishioners. To deal with the situation the Board of Supervisors established "pest houses" separated from the city. The state of the pest house was that of "living death". A glimpse is seen in a description written at the time. "At ten o'clock every night the lights are extinguished, and the patients left in darkness. The nurses retire and are not seen again until morning. In the meantime the sick are without attendance, and their sufferings present a picture too terrible for contemplation...There in the dark, closed room where nothing is visible and where the ears hear only cries of distress, pleadings for succor, or the ravings of the insane, they are locked in to pass the long hours of the night."<sup>16</sup>

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Mother Baptist immediately sought permission for the sisters to aid the sick and dying in the pest houses. Bishop Alemany approved of the proposal and the county immediately accepted. For nine months the sisters lived among the stricken. The tenderness, compassion and efficiency with which they served all the sick was a source of conversion as well as a vivid witness to the Gospel.

Once more the writers of the period give first hand evidence of the impact of unconditional service. "It was almost with a feeling of shame for Protestantism that we saw, the other day, when the continual complaints of mal-administration and neglect of patients at the Variola Hospital, in this city, seemed to be without remedy, none of our religious denominations save the Catholic Church had any organization which could furnish intelligent help—competent, intelligent, kind female nurses to enter that home of misery and take charge of its ministrations to the crowd of suffering humanity it contains. Those devoted Sisters of Mercy willingly presented themselves and entered on a mission of charity from which all others shrink in dismay and affright....Their fearless, self-sacrificing love is an honor to their church and to their order."<sup>17</sup>

The sisters were not looking for praise or even for an opportunity to reduce religious prejudice. Their focus was on alleviating the suffering of the sick and bringing persons to Christ. Sister Mary Francis wrote to Kinsale saying: "Now I shall turn from the body to the soul. The number baptized is truly consoling; also the number of negligent Catholics brought to make their peace with God. In most cases it is easy for us to get at their souls, because in the dreadful disease they become humbled. Proud men cannot but feel themselves objects of disgust to their fellow-creatures, and even to themselves. They are abandoned by their nearest and dearest, shunned as objects of terror. Therefore, when they see us joyfully attend them they are astonished and thankful, particularly as they know we receive no money for it."<sup>18</sup>

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## The sisters saw themselves as "at the service of the suffering poor."

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The sense of evangelizing presence lived by the founding sisters was coupled to a strong sense of Christ's presence in the suffering. Sister Mary Francis articulated this vision in a letter written to her substitute at the pest house. "My dearest Sub.: You must not break your heart about the instruction. The members are all simple good creatures and take as gospel everything the Sister says. Besides the real thing is to begin for God, and you will surely end for God, and in this

way you do good for soul and body, and what more is required?...I am astounded at myself, and what is doing it but prayer? My Mass is my morning visit to the afflicted victim personifying Our Divine Lord Himself. My Communion is the deep gratitude and consolation I feel in being allowed to comfort and console Him in their persons."<sup>19</sup>

The model of evangelizing through witnessing to God's mercy permeated all the works of mercy undertaken by the community. The sisters saw themselves as "at the service of the suffering poor." This was not defined by religion, ethnicity or gender. The services were freely extended to atheist and saint. It was done within a multicultural context. Mother Baptist set the tone for reaching out to persons of all backgrounds and language groups by her own attempts to learn the Spanish language. The variety of need is reflected by the confessions available in the hospital chapel. Penitents could confess in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.<sup>20</sup>

### Relational Ministry as Pathway to Conversion and Transformation

While it might be possible to stop at the contributions that Baptist and the California sisters made through their institutionalized ministries, their success was rooted in the quality of their relational ministry. No where is this better seen than in the prison visitation which was part of their routine. Baptist believed that if it was a work of mercy, it should be done. The jails and later San Quentin were filled with lapsed Catholics and persons seeking conversion of life. James Casey of sad vigilante days was one of the first who called for their attention. Baptist's request to visit him before his execution was denied.

The jails of the time were filled with innocent and guilty alike. In a society where law was sometimes interpreted by political considerations, justice was not impartial. Baptist and the sisters visited the jail three times a week. The jails of the time "were of the most primitive condition, apparently contrived for rendering their occupants as uncomfortable as possible, but without the slightest attention to sanitation and morals...There was no thought of reformation...The jails were foul pens, breeding places of disease and nurseries of crime."<sup>21</sup>

Into these conditions the sisters brought consolation, instruction, small items of comfort and a link to family and God. While the stories of repentance and conversion are numerous, the most vivid is that of William Morris. Morris, better known in the period as "Tipperary Bill" was a man of fierce temper and enormous strength. To put it bluntly, he scared the daylight out of everyone including his jailers. The guards were so intimidated by him that they always entered his cell in twos. The prisoner was deprived of all sunlight and after a failed escape was constantly chained. He was in deepest despair.

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The sisters frequently visited him in his cell. Locked in his cell the sisters gradually softened his heart through conversation, friendship, shared books and prayer. Bill made his First Communion and went to confession. He was even confirmed by Bishop Alemany. As the time of his execution approached, he asked the sisters not to grieve. "It's glad you ought to be that I die today. It's long years since I had the peace of mind that fills my heart this morning."<sup>22</sup> At the time of his public execution the demeanor of the prisoner was so transformed that it became the talk of San Francisco.

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## Love for the poor was the consuming passion of Mother Baptist's life.

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The depth of relationships which Baptist and the sisters established was not limited to the prisoners. It was characteristic of all their encounters. An eighty five year old woman whom Baptist frequently visited commented: "Mother Russell's daughters are welcome, very welcome; but no one's visit is like hers."<sup>23</sup> A mini-portrait gives us a glimpse into the tenderness with which Mary Baptist approached another. Sister Mary Howley tells us: "She loved the poor. There used to be a crazy women, and she used to go to her cell and say, 'I want to get into your bed,' and Mother would get up and put her in, not thinking that any one knew it, and would stay around her. She loved to make her happy even for a couple of minutes."<sup>24</sup>

### A Passion for the Poor and Suffering

Love for the poor was the consuming passion of Mother Baptist's life. Her sensitivity to their needs ranged from providing wedding dresses to avoid embarrassment for poor brides to cleaning houses and making dinner for families. She wholeheartedly embraced each person in need. Her ingenuity in providing for the poor gave rise to some stories that have a legend-like quality. Many stories involve her way of raiding the hospital linen supply to give bedding to the poor. Mother Baptist would pull up her petticoat and wrap the linen around her waist. When reaching the home of a needy family, she would pull the linen out and proceed to make up the beds. She did this so often that the Infirmary linen supply was placed upon lock and key.<sup>25</sup>

Whether pulling her own mattress down the stairs to give it to a poor man or providing food for hundreds during the economic depressions that swept San Francisco, her generosity never dimmed. Letters written by Baptist in March, 1894, reveal the extent of the need. "I think I mentioned the crowds of unemployed

men in this city for the last five months; 589 at our door for breakfast yesterday...It is going on since October. About Christmas the number was over six hundred for a few days."<sup>26</sup> Later that month she would again write but the depression was worse. That morning 658 came seeking food.

Baptist's criteria for acceptance as a Sister of Mercy included evidence of possessing a deep love for the poor. Many applicants were rejected because they failed that criteria. The extent to which the charism was lived is vividly reflected in the experience of the foundation at Sacramento. At the time of its foundation in 1857, education was the greatest need in the city. This the sisters started immediately but many illnesses necessitated a ministry to the sick as well. Care of the orphans was also vital. The greatest obstacle to a successful mission was climate. San Francisco may have had earthquakes but Sacramento had floods.

In 1861 the city was ravaged by flood waters. Hydraulic mining had destroyed the water shed and the rivers were swollen by continuous rains. The city lay under eight feet of thick yellow water. In San Francisco Baptist opened the doors of St. Mary's to care for the victims. The Sacramento sisters stayed in the city to meet the needs of its people. Although the first floor of the convent was under water, it was a center of flood relief. The sisters went out daily in boats climbing in and out of second story windows to minister to the sick and dying. This situation lasted five months.<sup>27</sup>

Even other parts of the world were to be touched by Baptist's love for the poor. She was quick to respond to Mother Austin Carroll plea for funds to help the poor of New Orleans. She sent money back to Ireland for famine relief. Her world was always bigger than the city in which she lived for forty-five years. Indeed, one of her last actions before her death was to direct that money be sent to a leper settlement in Japan.

Baptist's radical commitment to serve the poor may, in part, explain the differences in interpreting the charism that arose between Mother Frances Warde and herself. The discussion centered on the appropriateness of founding academies or boarding schools. Mary Baptist did not feel this work was consistent with the call to serve the poor. Influenced by Frances Bridgeman and impelled by her own understanding of the charism, Baptist felt such a work diverted energy and focus from the congregation's primary ministry to those in deepest need. Baptist recognized that such works could be undertaken for a limited period of time but felt they should be turned over to other orders whose charisms were more suitable for that ministry.

Education was vital to Baptist but she believed more in day school models. Adult education and technical training were high on her agenda because they prepared persons for moving out of poverty. In Sacramento she established the first subscription

library, one of two thousand books, to provide for educational resources.

An overview of the works of mercy carried on by the Mercy community in the West show a willingness and flexibility to meet needs of every description. Suffering, hunger, homelessness and misery brought forth instant responses. There was not a systematic plan to what they did. There was need and response. There was no pre-set starting point other than "need crying out for mercy." There was quickness to do what needed to be done. The sisters saw themselves at the service of both Church and society. Baptist joined forces with all those who were willing to enter into collaboration for the sake of eliminating human suffering and degradation.

Writing at the time of Baptist's death in August, 1898, Mrs. Mary A. Sullivan summed up the California foundress's love for the poor saying: "Little did she have to atone for. Possibly she may have had to say, 'Lord, I love the poor too much;' and inasmuch as He Himself became a fool through love, He will not have found it hard to forgive her."<sup>28</sup>

### Seeking God's Will in All Things

A life of one like Mother Baptist would easily burn out if not firmly rooted in God. A sister companion said of her: "Her knowledge of Scripture and of the Lives of the Saints, and indeed all her spiritual knowledge was very great. Her instructions were exceedingly practical and it is certain she always practiced what she preached...Her spirit of prayer was wonderful; she lived and loved in and for God. It required no effort for her to speak of Him;<sup>29</sup>

Mary Baptist knew what toll the constant works of mercy could take on body and spirit. Writing to the sisters in 1889 she advises: "I know you will each do all in your power to contribute to the general happiness during this joyous season, and that you will make good use of the quiet three days to lay in spiritual strength for the coming year, and repair the rents caused by your struggles during the time that is past...I hope you are keeping a good fire, and that those who have cold feet, which I dare say all have, get a jar of hot water in their bed at night. We are not so mortified as to wish to be kept awake all night with cold feet. Our mortification must be bearing with all that is disagreeable in each other..."<sup>30</sup>

Mother Baptist's profession motto was "Thy will be done." It was what she strived to do all her life. In a letter written to Sister Mary Regis, Baptist wrote: "The sentiments you express of entire and loving abandonment into the hands of God's providence are just what I most wish for you and for all of us."<sup>31</sup> Written on the back of the page is a verse ending with: "I, who, if Thy grace direct not, Know not what to ask or shun—Oh! my tender, loving Father, Not my will, but Thine be done."<sup>32</sup>

This gentle woman of God died on the feast of the

Transfiguration, 1898. Thousands came to her funeral and tributes abounded in the press of the period. Mother Austin Carroll put into words the sorrow of many: "For myself, I have no words to describe my grief. Humanly speaking, I could not have a greater loss. For almost two score years we loved each other in God and interchanged thoughts and mutually sought of each other advice and direction in matters which all outsiders could not readily understand. I never knew a more generous, charitable soul."<sup>33</sup>

Father R.E. Kenna, S.J. summed up the life of Baptist in a letter to Mother Columba and the bereaved sisters: "Gentle as a little child, she was brave and resolute as a Crusader. Prudence itself, yet she was fearless in doing good to the needy, and in advancing the interests of religion. All who met her were forced to admire; and those who knew her best loved her most."<sup>34</sup>

### Footnotes

1. Russell, Rev. Mathew. *The Life of Mother Mary Baptist Russell, Sister of Mercy.*, (New York, The Apostleship of Prayer, 1901), pg.23.
2. McArdle, Sister Mary Aurelia. *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy Mother Mary Baptist Russell.* (Fresno, Ca.: Academy Library Guild, 1954), pgs. 19-20.
3. Russell, *The Life of Mother Mary Baptist Russell*, pg. 24.
4. *Ibid.* pg. 40.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 40-41.
6. Mackenna, B. Vicuna., "Winter of 1853 in San Francisco", trans. Brother Veronius Henry, FSC. *Academy Scrapbook*, pg. 161.
7. Carroll, Mother Mary Austin. *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, Vol. III. (New York, 1889), pg.23.
8. *Ibid.*, pgs. 23-24
9. McArdle, *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy*, pg. 121.
10. Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, Vol. III. pg. 481.
11. *Ibid.*, 483.
12. McArdle, *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy*, pg. 46.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 47.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 108.
17. Carroll, Mother Mary Austin. *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy.* Vol. IV. (New York, 1895), pg. 51.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 52
19. *Ibid.*, pgs. 58-59.
20. McArdle, *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy*, pg. 63.
21. *Ibid.*, pgs. 98-99.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 102.
23. Russell, *The Life of Mother Mary Baptist Russell*, pg. 117.
24. Russell, *The Life of Mother Mary Baptist Russell*, pg. 57.
25. *Ibid.*, pg 57.
26. *Ibid.*, 125.
27. McArdle, *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy*, pg. 83.
28. *Ibid.*, pg.185.
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 162.
30. *Ibid.*, pg. 140.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 130.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 131.
33. *Ibid.*, pg. 181,182.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 183.



## Contributors

**Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.** (Detroit) is a native of Independence, Iowa. She was a secondary school educator in Detroit and Michigan. She has spent seventeen years in administrative roles with the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. She served as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (1989-1992). She lectures often on religious life, leadership and charism of the Sisters of Mercy. Currently she is pursuing doctoral studies in women and religion at the University of Iowa, Iowa City.

**Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.** (Auburn) is the Director of Marian Retreat Center. She received her Masters in Education from the University of San Francisco and a Masters in Liturgical Studies from St. John's University, Collegeville. Katherine is currently working on a study of Mother Mary Baptist Russell and is a member of the leadership team of the Auburn regional community.

**Patricia McCann** (Pittsburgh) serves on the Institute Leadership Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. She spent two terms on the leadership team of Pittsburgh regional community. She holds an M.A. in church history from the Catholic University of America and taught courses in American Catholic history, Middle Ages and Reformation, and Catholic social thought at St. Vincent Seminary, Latrobe, Pa., from 1970-1990. She has offered many workshops for those in religious formation and adult education.

**Mary Isabel MacDermott, R.S.M.** (Argentina-Detroit) has served as teacher in various Mercy schools in Argentina, and at Catholic Training College of Professors. Since retiring from active classroom teaching, she is engaged in pastoral work for the shut-ins, and homes for the elderly. She also translates into Spanish books and articles that have to do with the spirit and history of Mercy. At

present, she is engaged in translating Bourke's *A Woman Sings of Mercy*.

**Margaret Molitor, R.S.M.** (Cincinnati) holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the Catholic University of America. She has served in both secondary and college education, and as a research consultant. For the past few years, she has been Archivist for her regional community. Her "free" time is currently devoted to participation in civic, educational and health-related programs.

**Mary Hermenia Muldrey, R.S.M.** (St. Louis) has been involved in Mercy research and history for most of half a century during her career as a secondary teacher. Her publications include *Abounding in Mercy: Mother Austin Carroll*, and articles in journals of history, religion and archives.

**Anne Frances Pulling, R.S.M.** (Dallas, Pennsylvania) is an adjunct professor at Mt. Aloysius College in Cresson, Pa. She holds degrees from College Misericordia and Fordham University. Previously, she taught in schools on Long Island and in Pennsylvania. She has authored two books. Her latest project is *Sisters of Mercy of Loretto-Cresson*, which contains biographical sketches of the women who formed a small Mercy community high in the Allegheny mountains of western Pennsylvania.

**Julia Upton, R.S.M.** (Brooklyn) is Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at St. John's University, New York. She is author of *Becoming a Catholic Christian: A Pilgrim's Guide to the R.C.I.A.* (Pastoral Press, 1993) and *A Church for the Next Generation: Sacraments in Transition* (Liturgical Press, 1990). Julia also serves on the editorial board of *The MAST Journal*.

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