TO TELL OUR STORY IS TO PRAISE GOD

A History of the
Little Sisters of the Assumption
in Ireland

Carol Dorgan

Founder, Fr Etienne Pernet

Co-Founder, Mother Mary of Jesus

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Many people have contributed to this account of the History of the Province. So first of all I want to thank Nellie Curtin, the Provincial Leader until June 2014, for taking the risk of asking me to write it. I was happy to say yes then, as plenty of time seemed to stretch out before me. However, as months flew by and I had very little work to show, I feared my attraction to a challenge was beginning to look a bit foolhardy! Nellie has since undertaken to read over the entire document, and act as editor. Her help and supportive encouragement have been invaluable.

However, with the end in sight I want to acknowledge some, at least, of those others who have contributed from their memories and lived experiences. Eilis Murnane, the Archivist of what was then the Province and is now the Territory, has been more than helpful, and along with Eilis I include Tony Roche who knows more about the Little Sisters than many others. He has been putting the entire collection of written and photographic material on line – a gigantic task – and has been at the end of the phone any time I needed to speak to him. Being able to access all of this on my own laptop has made the work so much easier for me. I would also like to mention Anne Boland, who was present at the start of several of the post 1965 communities, and through the propaganda film opened doors to new dioceses in the 1960's. She shared vivid memories with me over the phone. I also spoke to several other Sisters who were all extremely helpful with their information or suggestions, and I thank each one sincerely. Any factual mistakes or omissions are entirely my responsibility. Mary Malone deserves a special mention for combing through the chapter on Ethiopia and making some helpful suggestions and additions. Mary B. O'Sullivan likewise.

It has been a privilege to do this work, and I came across much information I had not been aware of before. The entire history is an inspiring story of faith, of courage, of determination, of genuine love for people, especially those who are suffering in one way or another, and behind it all and nourishing it all, a deep love for God and for the charism and spirit of

the Congregation. It may be that the Congregation has fulfilled its mission, at least in this part of the world, but the love inspiring it does not die, and ultimately God is the One who draws all people and all creation together as one interrelated community, ensuring that the lives and mission of the Sisters will live on.

My thanks to Carmel Molloy and Catherine Dunphy who have continued to support this project.

The quotations from the *Rule of Life* are from the 1984 edition.

Carol Dorgan
March 2016

"TO TELL OUR STORY IS TO PRAISE GOD"

POPE FRANCIS

"Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. More than an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia, it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities. In this way we come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it encountered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted. We may also encounter cases of inconsistency, the result of human weakness and even at times a neglect of some essential aspects of the charism. Yet everything proves instructive and, taken as a whole, acts as a summons to conversion. To tell our story is to praise God and to thank him for all his gifts."

Apostolic Letter to Religious on the
Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 2015.
Pope Francis

INTRODUCTION

IRELAND IN THE 1800S

Ireland in the late 1800s had few signs of wealth. It was a very poor country, politically and economically dependent on England, and a largely unwilling member of the British Empire. The moneyed class tended to be Anglo-Irish, descendants of those who had been settled here in previous centuries, rewarded with rich agricultural land for services to the Crown. Some of these "big house" i.e. country-house landowners, were very philanthropic, showing real practical concern for their tenants and servants during the devastating famine of the mid 1840s. Others were notoriously heartless, Businessmen (almost always men), lived with their families in large houses in the main cities – Dublin, Belfast and Cork and included ship-building magnates, mill owners, professionals such as doctors, lawyers and judges, etc. Without the deep Christian concern and extraordinary generosity of some of these individuals the Little Sisters would have found it almost impossible to put down roots in the country, as we shall see. The concept of social welfare, where the State assumes responsibility for the needy, had not yet developed and the vast majority of the poor depended for survival on the existence of charitable bodies and individuals: hospitals and schools set up and run by religious, and proportionally, though to a lesser extent, by the Church of Ireland and the Quakers. Minimal state aid took the shape of the dreaded Workhouses, which were regarded as the absolute last resort by destitute people. The prevailing social philosophy was that of "laissez faire" (let the market decide), and economic "trickle down" theory a belief (without much foundation in fact) that wealth (money) trickles down eventually to the needy – so there is no real need for intervention from the state. So theory ruled, despite evidence to the contrary.

The Irish population was predominantly rural. The industrial revolution, in full swing in England and France, had not really taken hold here. The great famine and its immediate aftermath in the mid nineteenth century had decimated the population, cutting it by almost half, and the psychological after-effects must have left a complexity of feelings among survivors and their offspring. There would have been little energy to suddenly transform into entrepreneurship. Centuries of colonisation had also left their mark of dependency.

The Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Assumption had been founded in France in 1865 by Fr Etienne Pernet, member of the newly established Augustinians of the Assumption, and Antoinette Fage, a middle aged woman orphaned at a very young age, as an effort to ease the misery of urban impoverishment among poor and working class families. Sixteen years later, in 1880, the first community outside France was established in London at the request of Cardinal Manning. A community in New York, in the early days of 1891, was followed quickly by Dublin, on 4 April 1891, at the invitation of Monsignor Kennedy, Chancellor of the Dublin Archdiocese.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LITTLE SISTERS' FIRST YEARS IN DUBLIN

The arrival of the Little Sisters of the Assumption in Dublin owes its origin to a providential series of circumstances. Widespread and terrible poverty reigned in the city, described further in greater detail below, and was well known and documented by travellers from Britain and the continent. But a small group of well-to-do women, led by a Mrs Clarke, of Mount Merrion Avenue, Blackrock, began meeting to discuss what might be done. Providentially, Mrs Clarke had a close friend living in Paris, Mrs Vaughan, who was an active helper of Fr Pernet at that time. and she spoke to him about conditions in Dublin. Around about the same time an Irish Sister in the recently established Bow community in London also spoke to the Founder of her concerns. So not long afterwards Fr Pernet accompanied by two Sisters travelled to Dublin and stayed with the hospitable Mrs Clarke. From there they visited the great and saintly Archbishop Walshe, as well as Monsignor Kennedy in whose parish of James Street in inner city Dublin, it had been decided to establish a community. The visitors then departed, having accomplished their mission, and not long after, on 16 April 1891, four Little Sisters disembarked at North Wall, Dublin, after a long and tiring journey by sea, where they were met by two men thoughtfully sent by Monsignor. Kennedy. These men escorted the little group to 116 James Street, a house ideally situated opposite the parish church and generously provided by a Mr Charles Brennan. On arrival they were warmly welcomed by the Monsignor and Mrs Clarke, who, we can be sure, had ensured that the house looked its best and was furnished with necessary provisions and a warm fire.

James Street, a busy thoroughfare just south of the River Liffey, was also the site of Guinness's Brewery, at that time the largest brewery in the world, and the equally large South Dublin Union, a hospital and asylum for the destitute. For the first three years Mrs Clarke generously arranged to finance the Sisters, until permission was granted to allow them to start "questing" – the practice whereby certain religious orders, whose charitable work earned no remuneration, called on wealthier homes and businesses to request money for the support of their activities. When the community increased to five and then grew still further, a larger house was required, so No 1 Upper Camden St was procured, and the Sisters moved there in October 1896, the Marist Fathers living in nearby Leeson Street becoming their Chaplains.

While the request to come to Dublin had been made by the Chancellor of the Archdiocese and Parish Priest of James' Street, Monsignor Kennedy, the community was also strongly supported by the much loved Archbishop Walsh (1885–921) described shortly after his death as 'the greatest archbishop of Dublin since St Laurence O'Toole'. Walsh was endowed with great energy and intellectual ability, wide interests, and the ability to write on numerous subjects. His political standing and strong social conscience enabled him, through years of political tumult, to keep the Catholic Church in touch with the aspirations of the majority population both on national and social issues, and he championed the cause of the most defenceless. The mission of the Little Sisters would have been close to his heart, and his support was unhesitating.

From the time of their arrival in Dublin the Sisters were extremely busy. Despite having very little English they were welcomed warmly by the local people who went out of their way to support them. With the help of individuals such as Monsignor Kennedy, a committee of generous benefactors was quickly assembled to offer their resources and knowledge of the city, its culture and customs, to the new arrivals. We can find important details of the LSA mission from annual reports of the Sisters to this group, which was known as "the Ladies of the Auxiliary Committee of the Little Sisters of the Assumption."

Several of the monthly reports to these Lady Auxiliaries list diseases encountered and people nursed with loving care and skill by the Sisters: those affected by TB or "consumption", Typhoid, Bronchitis, Cancer,

Dropsy, Rheumatic Fever, post-operative surgical cases, as well as "confinements". Reading the reports we can gain a picture of the prevalent social conditions of the poor: overcrowding – one or more families living in one room sharing a communal toilet with other tenement families; poor hygiene, poor nutrition, damp, crumbling unsafe buildings. Even No 1 Upper Camden Street shared some of these conditions. There were rats. A cat was procured for the house. Unfortunately, when the Founder came to stay the cat had to go. Fr Pernet had decreed that no community should keep a pet animal, and he could not be persuaded that this cat was a necessary feature to keep down the rats and not a pet! The Sisters reportedly were very distressed, as were some of their sympathetic new neighbours. However, the Founder's word was sacrosanct.

Years later one of the Camden Street community Brenda O'Neill, who transferred to O'Curry Road and then to Cork Street, wrote the following email to me about that incident.

> "I nursed an old lady in Dolphin's Barn in the '70s. She was born in James St a few doors from where the first LSAs came to live. She remembered that they had a lot of trouble with English but despite that they kept going out to families in the parish. She said they used to go to a friend of her mother in Emerald Square (off Cork St.), who was in a wheelchair. At that stage all of Dolphins Barn and Cork St areas belonged to James Street Parish (a window in Dolphin's Barn Church says founded from James St in ? I can't recall the date). Her mother used to bring them some food when they had any to spare and she felt they were sometimes hungry even though they never said a word. She also brought them flowers for their chapel every Saturday.
> Another little story she told me was that the Sisters kept a cat because of all the rats from the river and the breweries around. When Stephen Pernet visited he insisted they get rid of the cat because of some rule against keeping pets. The Sisters were very upset and her mother was really mad that the priest did not understand the need for a cat in an area so infested with rats.
> I remember being really excited to meet this woman and hear the stories. It was like having a direct connection to the first community". Brenda O'Neill.

But the other great concern of the Sisters, and of course the Catholic Church, was the lack of religious instruction given to children, as many did not go to school or went only sporadically. The Sisters also made this part of their ministry – preparing children and young people for Communion and Confirmation, and holding classes for adults on a weekly basis to prepare many of them for Confirmation too. A number of men, in particular, were encouraged to "make their Easter Duty" and be reconciled to God. It was also noted with appreciation that the Sisters placed great value on seeing that the children went to school so as not to miss out on their education.

The first extant report of the work of the Sisters is actually the account presented to the second meeting of the Ladies of the Auxiliary Committee of the Little Sisters of the Assumption on the afternoon of 26 April 1894, which was also the Annual General Meeting. It was held in the presence of the Archbishop and Father Pernet, at 116 James Street, Dublin. There was a large attendance: at least fifty-seven, consisting of many clergy, especially those from local parishes, as well as representatives of several male religious orders: Marists, Vincentians, Jesuits, Augustinians, Passionists. Among the lay people present were the Lord Mayor, a member of the Judiciary, and a number of wealthy men and women, including two doctors. There were even six apologies! At this meeting Father Pernet expressed his deep gratitude to all present, firstly to the Archbishop, and then to Monsignor Kennedy, who, he said, had been 'like a father' to the Sisters from the moment they arrived! While lamenting his inability to express himself in English, he encouraged the group in their efforts to sustain the work of the Sisters in relieving the sufferings of the poor for the glory of God.

A handwritten report to the Lady Auxiliaries, unfortunately not dated apart from the heading "February", graphically describes some of the "cases" encountered. A young father arrived in desperation at the door of 116 James St just as the Sisters were going to bed. The eldest of his children, a young boy of nine, was ill. At first, he explained, he thought it was just a cold, but the child was not improving, and his wife had been admitted to the Asylum. Two Sisters at once returned with him to his home, and found five children in the same bed, including the sick boy. They immediately removed the patient from the bed, as he seemed

to have rheumatic fever, and then began the elaborate process of getting him admitted to the "Union" hospital, (today known as St James' Hospital in the south inner city of Dublin). This entailed getting a letter from Monsignor Kennedy to the local Dispensary doctor, a Protestant, requesting admission to the hospital. There was no response from the doctor a not infrequent occurrence it appears when it came to Catholics, so two Sisters were sent to the hospital to explain the situation and one of the doctors there agreed to admit the child. Meanwhile the father had gone to the Magistrate to plead for his wife's discharge, as she had been certified as well again. The little boy was prepared by the Sister to receive what was then known as Extreme Unction, and later in the hospital made his first confession and communion. This same letter also recounts how Sisters did night duty at the bedside of those who were seriously ill, and such thorough and conscientious nursing often brought about recovery. At the Annual General Meeting, mentioned above, the attention of those present was drawn to the fact that no other service in the city provided this level of attentive care.

A further cause of concern arose when children needed to be cared for within another family either on a temporary basis or for a longer period. The Catholic Church, and the Sisters also of course, were very concerned that children be placed with "good, Catholic" families. If that was not possible then they would be sent to Catholic residential homes.

Dublin at this time, while an important city in the British Empire, was also one of the pooreSt "In 1911 Dublin had the worst housing conditions of any city in the United Kingdom. Its extensive slums were not limited to the back-streets or to impoverished ghettos. By 1911 the city slums also incorporated great Georgian houses on previously fashionable streets and squares. As the wealthy moved to the suburbs over the course of the 19th century, their huge, red-brick buildings were abandoned to the rent-paying poor… Tenements in the inner-city were filthy, overcrowded, disease-ridden, teeming with malnourished children and very much at odds with the elite world of colonial and middle-class Dublin. In 1911 nearly 26,000 families lived in inner-city tenements, and 20,000 of these families lived in just one room. Most families were dependent on intermittent casual labour… People living in tenements were failed by the city authority, Dublin Corporation, which did not develop any meaningful policy to improve

tenement life."[1] Structurally many of these buildings were precarious, and there were many tragic incidents where the walls collapsed on their occupants. The decay of Dublin was epitomised by Henrietta Street, once the chosen location of generations of lawyers, but which was, by 1911, overflowing with the poverty stricken. An astonishing 835 people lived in 15 houses! We know that at number 10 Henrietta Street, the Daughters of Charity ran a laundry with more than fifty single women living there. In another premises, No 7, were found members of nineteen different families. Among the 104 people living there were charwomen, domestic servants, labourers, porters, messengers, painters, carpenters, pensioners, a postman, a tailor, and an entire class of schoolchildren. "Out the back" was a stable and a piggery.

Life in the slums was raw and desperate. As noted above, many one-room tenements did not just house one family, but that family also took in members of the extended families or others as sub-tenants. In 1911 among the tenements of Mabbot Street and Tyrone Street, 17 families kept lodgers, most despite living in a single room. People were desperate for any means of securing some income. Poverty was the preserve of no creed, of course. But Tenement dwellers were failed, not only by the State, but by the Catholic Church, whose parishioners these poor people were, by and large. This conservative approach to State relief of poverty, was held by all as the orthodox economics.

In their efforts for the relief of poverty the Churches divided on religious lines, competing with each other, particularly with regard to children, and there was suspicion in those pre-ecumenical times, that one or other Church was trying to "poach" or "convert" people by giving them food or shelter. Mention is made in reports kept by the Lady Auxiliaries of Mrs Smyly's Homes and Schools for children, where it was believed that children were placed and brought up as Protestants. In those times any such effort at poverty relief was not regarded kindly by the Catholic Church. Families subsisted on the small wages of a casual labourer – if the husband was present, and able for work – or the efforts of women and children selling on the streets. For the sick there were many small hospitals, established by benefactors all across the city, as well as the dreaded Workhouses, the South Dublin Union and Reform Institutions for chil-

1 Cf. National Archives, accessed on-line February 2015

dren caught in petty crime, such as stealing.

Because of poverty, bad housing, gross overcrowding, malnutrition and general lack of hygiene both on the streets outside and within homes, diseases spread rapidly. Overall, the death rate in Dublin was 22.3 per thousand; in London it was just 15.6. l

Under the Children Act 1908, inspectors known as Infant Protection Visitors were employed. They had much to do. In 1911 records show that men and women were serving time in Mountjoy Prison for mistreating or neglecting their children. Many children themselves were sent to one of the several "Penitentiaries" for children across the city, the majority for petty theft. And for all manner of reasons, boys could also be sent to prison or to one of the Industrial Schools. Such was the respect for property owners that no regard was had for others who were simply on the lookout for a loaf of bread, a few potatoes or even a turnip, to feed a family.

Women tried to make money as dealers selling fish, fruit, flowers, old clothes, even pigs and much else, along the edges of footpaths. Some streets of the city such as Moore Street, and Meath Street still retain this historic form of street selling, daughters taking over from mothers, although, increasingly today these spaces are being taken over for modern development. Women would also work at home in the evenings, sometimes joining with other women and straining their eyes in bad light to make various items such as bags, hats, vests and dresses. Others worked in laundries or as parlour maids. Some worked in factories as weavers of wire and in the fields which still lay in parts of the city. Some were forced to turn to prostitution on the streets or in brothels, and were consigned to Mountjoy Prison.

For those living in poverty, some succour came from the Liberal Government of David Lloyd George and Henry Asquith, arguably the most radical administration to govern Ireland in the twentieth century. Its legacy included the introduction of old age pensions in 1908, labour exchanges in 1909, and a national insurance scheme to afford workers protection against sickness, invalidity and unemployment in 1911. The introduction of the old-age pension for the over-70s was of enormous importance, alleviating some of the distress that attended the last years of those no longer able to work, even if work could have been found. The Liberals progressively tackled social issues, sometimes to the discomfort of the Irish par-

liamentary party, who initially voted against Lloyd George's famous 'People's Budget' in response to Irish unrest at the additional alcohol duties it imposed.

As we read about these horrific social conditions we can only imagine the courage, determination and faith of those early Sisters faced with such misery and destitution, and in an unfamiliar culture and language. Far from throwing up their hands in despair, they set about bringing comfort, healing and warmth, as well as, and as a last resort, material help, to those of least account in the derelict slums of this Imperial city. Indeed, much of the money donated to them for their own upkeep was spent on food or clothing for their families.

There had obviously been some criticism elsewhere about the need for Little Sisters in Ireland. It was a Catholic country after all, so why not send Irish Sisters to England, the United States, France? There certainly were Irish Sisters in these countries, but in a subsequent report this objection is emphatically dealt with: Ireland needs the Sisters, this report insists. Fr Pernet always said that Little Sisters should go to the most destitute, and they are certainly found here. with many conditions associated not only with poverty and illness, but also with social and "moral" problems: abuse of alcohol, immorality and (rather oddly), "communism by stealth" (my italics). Underlying everything, the report went on, is the strong faith of the majority of Irish people and it does not take a superhuman effort to persuade them to return to the practice of their religion. More importantly, "the professionals want us here." With determined assertions like these, objections obviously withered away.

We can assume that day by day, month by month and year by year the Sisters faithfully answered the call of the poor. However, several cataclysmic events in Dublin seem to go unmentioned. Perhaps there was a determined effort by the Sisters not to engage in any political speculation. But these events would have deeply affected the poor and so the Sisters would have been well aware of them. There was the Lock-Out in 1913, when about 400 employers, under the leadership of William Martin Murphy, decided to lock out their workers who had been protesting about working conditions and their employers' opposition to setting up a Trade Union. This sounded too much like communism! A quick Google search provides much information. But the Lockout was devastating especially to non-un-

ionised workers who received no strike pay and were totally dependent on charity. The Sisters must have encountered many sad and tragic tales of the effects of this on the poorest families. James Plunkett's novel *Strumpet City* graphically portrays both sides of the dispute, and clearly reveals the class divisions between employers and workers. The Catholic Church, because of its belief in the right to private property, tended to support the employers. It would take over fifty years for the "cry of the poor" to be heard by Bishops and theologians and to be included in Church teaching and practice.

Then in Easter 1916 the Easter Rising occurred taking many by surprise, but the aftermath, with the cold, merciless executions of its leaders galvanised thousands of otherwise apathetic people throughout the country into action, most notably perhaps, in Cork. In addition, the momentum it all engendered led to the War of Independence in 1921 followed a year later by the tragically divisive Civil War. Both of these caused much destruction of buildings in the city centre: the GPO, whose foundation stone was laid in 1814, the neo-classical Custom House, opened in 1791, with all its public records, Clery's department store, and many other buildings. Some of the clamour, the noise, the burnings and shootings must have reached No 1 Upper Camden Street, and have been a source of trepidation for Sisters going about their mission, and it would have been interesting to have known how they coped with the stresses of their own emotions as well as the difficulties suffered by the families among whom they worked. They might well have feared that the fighting and destruction would reach their street. Fortunately for all, Camden Street was spared, but inevitably families were not. There would have been many bereaved people, and others caring for injured family members. A number of children were killed or wounded, often in crossfire and sometimes in error by their own side.

CHAPTER TWO

DUN LAOGHAIRE, OR "KINGSTOWN"

While little sisters were busily establishing themselves and becoming known in Dublin city centre, a charitable couple, Mr and Mrs Bannon, from the wealthy suburb of Donnybrook, were very concerned about the plight of the poor in Dun Laoghaire, or Kingstown, as it was known up until 1920. Kingstown, situated about 7.5 miles from Dublin city centre, was a Victorian era sea-side resort. It also had one of the largest harbours in the country, constructed after a disaster in the early 1800s when two English troop ships sailing from Dublin, were shipwrecked with the loss of 400 lives. This couple wanted to devote a considerable sum of money to ease the plight of the Dun Laoghaire poor. They knew how poverty affected vulnerable families and individuals and that in times of illness these people could not afford proper nursing care, so they began to talk together about of the possibility of employing Jubilee Nurses, as District Nurses established in Britain to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, were known. What should be their next step? They decided to consult the Parish Priest in Dun Laoghaire.

The Parish Priest welcomed them to his Presbytery, wondering what this Donnybrook couple wanted to see him about. But when they told them of their concerns and plan, their visit must have seemed a direct answer to his prayer, because he told them that some new French Congregation, the Little Sisters of the Assumption, had, a few years previously, begun doing exactly this kind of work in Dublin city, and he had been hearing much praise about them. They had set up a community in James Street in the city centre at the request of the Parish Priest Monsignor Kennedy to nurse in the families of the poor. If the Bannons could assist these Sisters in coming to Kingstown it would seem to be the perfect so-

lution. The couple agreed, and greatly encouraged, they departed, drove back home to Donnybrook, and began to set this plan in motion. Their curiosity must have been stirred to know more about these unusual Sisters who seemed to be able to leave their convents to go at any time of the day or night wherever they were needed, and spend whatever length of time was necessary to care for a sick person, while looking after the rest of the family as well. Other religious with whom they were acquainted, were at that time much more restricted in their comings and goings. The invitation to the Sisters was promptly issued and a house found at no 52 York Road. The first little group arrived, and had the great privilege of having their founder, Fr Pernet, with them. He celebrated the first Mass there on 8 September, Feast of the Birthday of Our Lady, 1897. While in Dublin he stayed with the Augustinians in John's Lane, in the centre of Dublin city.

We have the names of this first group of six: Sr Marie St Paul, (Superior), Srs Ida, Sébastienne, Juliana (who sadly died 22 months later), Paul de la Croix, and lastly Josephita who arrived on 23 December. The following year, Sr Marie St Paul was appointed Superior to Camden Street, and in early September Mother Aldegonde arrived, just in time to welcome a "Regular Visit" from the Superior General, Mother Mary of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Sisters developed the habit of going to the Parish Church for daily Mass, except for one day each week when it was celebrated in the house. Christmas 1898 had an additional cause for celebration: the Blessed Sacrament was finally installed in their convent.

The following year, on 4 April, the beloved founder died. He had hoped to come again to Ireland, but no 52 York Road was, in fact, the last house he had managed to visit.

Inevitably No 52 was found to be too small, and another, larger house further up the road, No 35 was considered: It had possibilities for extension, so when Mother Berchmans, a General Councillor, came to visit, she was brought to see this building, and some time later it was bought through the generosity of the Parish Priest and a Mr Bermingham, who lent the necessary money. So the community was once again on the move thanks to the extraordinary beneficence of strangers.

The Sisters welcomed the Mother General Mother Mary of the Blessed Sacrament, successor to the Foundress, Mother Mary of Jesus, several

times, and in 1904, she came to install a new Superior, Sr Patrick. Both went to visit Mrs Bannon, now very old and frail, in her Donnybrook home. She continued to have the welfare of the Little Sisters in mind, since she gave them £50 to support a regular chaplain from the Marist Fathers and, as the two visitors were standing up to leave, promised the sum of £500 to build a chapel. Sure enough, not many days later, an envelope arrived through the letter box containing the cheque.

Another noteworthy event marked the Dun Laoghaire/Kingstown house at this time. A statue of Our Lady was presented by Mrs Clarke, and placed in the garden by a Mr Long who created a grotto for it. The grotto then became a little shrine of remembrance when someone had the bright idea of inscribing on parchment the names of some of the Sisters associated with the house, together with the names of the Long family. This was then placed in a niche of the grotto. These names were: Mother St Patrick, Srs. Columba, Hyacinthe, Xavier, Elizabeth de la Croix, Imelda Marie, and Juliana. The statue with its grotto was solemnly blessed on September 8, 1905.

Three years later the Chapel, thanks to Mrs Bannon's generous donation, was blessed by the Parish PrieSt Meanwhile various changes and extensions were made to No 35. In 1912 cells (small bedrooms for the Sisters) were built over the old community room, which must have given added comfort and privacy to their occupants.

The terrible European war from 1914–1918, meant that no more visits could be made to and from France, and with communications largely disrupted, the Irish communities continued on as best they could.

Nothing of note is recorded for the following years. However, in 1939 Dun Laoghaire was chosen as the new Postulate. As recorded in the chapter on Formation, Mother Aldegonde championed the idea of young religious remaining in their own countries for their initial years of formation. But when World War 11 broke out only Irish born Sisters, living as postulants and novices at Woodlands, could obtain passports to return home. This meant having two separate systems of formation, and the separation of England and Ireland into two "Vicariates", which eventually became two separate Provinces.

The long, difficult and dangerous train and boat journey from London north-west through the blacked-out English countryside to Dun

Laoghaire is also recounted in the Chapter of Formation. The little group would have received a very warm and relieved welcome among the community once they disembarked safely. A good rest and food would have been first on their agenda! The novices then travelled to Cork.

While the care of Postulants continued, the "mission" was not neglected. A letter survives, from the Medical Officer for Health in Dun Laoghaire No 1 Dispensary District, dated 2 June 1943, warmly testifying to the dedication and skill of the Sisters in their care of the sick. He begins by saying that he had been working in this district for fifteen years, and until recently the housing situation had been very bad, causing certain illnesses associated with lack of hygiene, as well as pneumonia, TB, gastro-enteritis.

> "The Sisters were not only ready and constant, unselfish and unremitting, but also thoroughly capable and skilful in their nursing and care of the sick in the district, all of which they did alone and unaided to my entire satisfaction".
> And he goes on to declare: "I have never been afraid to entrust the very worst cases of Pneumonia, Uraemia and serious conditions of children to their care and have not once found them to fail in either competency or attention. In fact I will go further.... many lives have been saved in the poorest of houses in the district that would most certainly have been lost otherwise....Apart from (nursing) the Sisters bring help and comfort in other ways... not only nursing sick mothers but bathing and feeding babies, cooking meals for school-going children and for husbands coming home from work – and where (as is often the case) there is no food to cook, often bringing food and nourishment from the Convent". In conclusion he offers the following strong endorsement of the Sisters: "I am more than satisfied with the help and cooperation they give me in the care of my district".
> Signed, Thomas Lydon, MB, DPH, M.O.H. No 1 Dispensary, Dun Laoghaire, 2/6/43.

The Sisters continued their mission throughout the poorer surrounding neighbourhoods, and several did their nursing training at St Michael's Hospital nearby. But as the years went by numbers inevitably began to

decrease. There were population movements too, and the Sisters eventually made a big decision to leave York Road (which was taken over by the Health Services), and move to Ballybrack, in December 1978. Ballybrack is a large area of public and private houses south of Killiney, where Sisters continued their public health nursing and pastoral work. A small community remains there to this day. A little over a year later, in March 1979, another group, all of them retired, moved to two adjacent bungalows on Kill Avenue, where they stayed until 1997, when the remaining Sisters moved to a house in Grange, Dun Laoghaire, and the Kill Avenue properties were sold to the St John of God Brothers later that same year. Grange itself closed finally in 2015.

And so the story of the presence of the Little Sisters of the Assumption in Dun Laoghaire is finally coming to an end after more than a century.

CHAPTER THREE

BEGINNINGS IN CORK

In 1899, two years after the first community arrived in Kingstown, the Sisters went to Cork. Ireland's second city, situated in the south of the country, is blessed with a wide natural harbour on the Atlantic coast – the third largest natural harbour in the world. The city, one tradition states, owes its origin to St Finbarr, who followed the course of the River Lee from its source in the Western hills, to the marshy lands by the ocean, and there built a monastery in 650 AD, called Corcaigh, "a marsh". In the 8th and 9th centuries Vikings, adventurers and pirates from Norway, raided this monastery, but once peace was established between invaders and monks, the Viking ships began to bring new produce, such as wine and salts, into the country. In this way trading commenced, and buildings began to be erected. The resulting city was constructed on this swampy ground at Corcaigh and the oldest maps show a small rectangular area surrounded on three sides by marshes and on the fourth by the sea. Gradually the marshes were filled in and built on, but low lying areas remain subject to flooding to this day. When England took control of the country after the successful Norman invasion of Ireland, Cork was given its charter as a city in 1175,

The magnificent harbour and the great Atlantic Ocean, connecting Ireland with mainland Europe and the Americas, bestowed on Cork its character as a very busy centre of trade, of emigration and immigration. A wealthy merchant class grew up.

Many of these merchants, traders and professional people built large houses a little beyond the river, but by the time the Sisters had arrived these had become damp, crumbling, overcrowded and rat-infested tenements, while their former owners moved away to greener, healthier sites. The local pawn shop was a busy place every Friday, when the man's suit would be taken out for Sunday Mass, and deposited back on Monday.

Due to overcrowding and the low-lying situation of the houses there was much sickness. One cold tap "out the back" was the sole source of water for cooking, cleaning, drinking. There were no indoor toilets, and there was no heating. Some families had a Range, but others relied on an open fire with perhaps two hobs from which large blackened pots were hung. Many women had stalls on the Coal Quay. In a low lying area called "The Marsh," a large number of poor and elderly were somehow scrabbling for a living, many of them social outcasts, compassionately described by the Cork-born journalist, Feargal Keane in his book *All of These People.* They could be called victims of life's circumstances, ending their days huddling under newspapers and old coats, with nothing but a primus stove to heat both themselves and whatever food they could find.

The Cork Poor Law Union was established in 1838, and a purpose-built workhouse and hospital erected (later modified into a hospital and home for elderly people, called St Finbarr's hospital). A very much modified St Finbarr's still exists and thrives today, giving excellent care to the elderly, as well as offering other health care services.

During the nineteenth century, some charitable societies, both Catholic and Protestant did their best to ease the plight of the poor: the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Cork Penny Dinners, and others, not forgetting the Sick Poor Society, a Charitable Catholic lay-religious organisation dedicated to assisting those in poverty who were also living with illness. The Society developed into an important organisation in the North Cathedral Parish and Shandon area of the city.

Infectious and contagious diseases were, unsurprisingly, endemic in nineteenth century Cork., as was alcoholism, due in part to the large number of breweries. If you were to walk through the inner city and into the warren of lanes off Barrack Street, south of the Lee, as well as up Shandon Street on the opposite side of the river, you would see abysmal and overcrowded housing conditions. Sanitation was primitive. Access to clean drinking water was limited. The streets and lanes were smelly and filthy, with human waste found along the gutters. In the houses of the very poorest it was not uncommon to find a heap of manure which had been collected for sale to farmers. Personal hygiene was ignored, and, for the majority, almost impossible to maintain.

Attempts by Cork Corporation and the Improved Dwellings Compa-

ny to clear these slums and provide alternative housing for the occupants were only partially successful. While some slums were demolished, not enough houses were built to accommodate their inhabitants. Furthermore, the rents charged for the new houses were often out of the reach of the pooreSt Naturally both Cork Corporation and the Improved Dwellings Company tended to favour tenants with prudent and temperate habits, and this was reflected in the names chosen for some of the new housing developments: Industry Street and Prosperity Square, situated near Barrack Street, being two typical examples. The net result was that even more desperately poor people were crowded into the remaining tenements. Frank O'Connor's novel '"The Saint and Mary Kate' is set in one of these tenements in what is still known as the Middle Parish. The voluntary charitable groups worked very hard to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, since the State, through the local Poor Law Guardians, and "the Union" Workhouses was regarded as the last resort.

The Catholic Bishop of Cork at that time, Dominican friar Most Reverend Dr. Alphonsus O'Callaghan, had a deep love and concern for the poor. He was approached one day by Mrs George Barry, (née Mini Dwyer), member of a well-known family, owning Warehouses in the city. A deeply charitable woman, she had been setting up local relief organisations as well as branches of the Temperance Movement in an effort to provide help to those most destitute. But she now had a new suggestion: Jubilee Nurses. Could Cork have its own Jubilee Nurses? She had already spoken to several priests and had their support. However, on consulting the Bishop she found that he was more far-seeing and had other thoughts:

> "It is not a lay organisation whose members would do an individual work in an individual way that is needed," he said. "What we want is a religious community whose sole work would be to nurse, gratuitously, the poor in their homes. If such a community exists, then I would be glad to welcome them to the diocese."

Is it possible that he had already heard about the Little Sisters, perhaps from some of his confrères? This was Father Pernet's inspiration in a nutshell!

The President of the Priests' Seminary at Farranferris, Canon John

O'Mahony and another supporter of Mrs Barry, set out to research the existence of a religious community of this kind. Although the Little Sisters of the Assumption had arrived in Dublin some years previously, and by now had established two communities, one in central Dublin city and the other in Kingstown, their existence was unknown in Cork. So when a friend of Dr. O'Mahony, recently returned from the United States, told him of this French community now working among the poor in New York city it seemed an answer to his prayers. Without delay he set sail for the United States in 1898 to see for himself whether this Order would be suitable. He visited, met and discussed with the Sisters, learned that their Mother House was in Paris, and, to his immense surprise and gratification, that two communities were now well established in Dublin! Back he went with as much haste as was possible to Bishop O'Callaghan, who wrote without delay to the authorities in Paris, requesting a community for the city of Cork. The following year on May 28, 1899. six Sisters – 1 French, 2 Irish and 3 English, – disembarked at Cork harbour. Their first house was at Grenville Place, by the South Channel of the River Lee, not an ideal location as was soon realised. Two days later, Bishop O'Callaghan arrived to celebrate the first Mass in the little Convent, and remained a faithful friend and supporter, recommending the Sisters to the city priests, especially those working in Farranferris, the Diocesan Seminary overlooking the city. Many of the religious communities of Sisters also warmly welcomed them. One of the local doctors later gave them high praise:

> What impressed me most about these Sisters, he wrote, was their utter simplicity; there were 'no bones' made about anything the doctor ordered. They did what was asked of them quietly and efficiently. If early morning care was needed, they were there to provide it. If night care was called for, they were there again. There was, of course, never any question of fees. To my mind their work was real charity.

This same doctor, out of concern for their health, negotiated with the Cork Tramway Company for free passes for the Sisters who otherwise would be walking long distances, frequently on the hilly "north side" of the city to and from patients.

However, a more serious problem quickly manifested itself. The river's

proximity meant that the cellar at Grenville Place was frequently flooded, and the house, as a consequence, was very damp. In addition, it proved to be too small for the increasing number of Sisters coming to serve the poor of Cork. Unfortunately, the superior, Mother Marthe, became seriously ill and had to return to France. However, this may have been a blessing in disguise as she was replaced by a formidable woman, whose influence on the Congregation and in Ireland especially, would be considerable. Mother Marie Aldegonde arrived to assume leadership of the community in January 1902. She was to remain for many years. Shortly after her arrival, and helped by Bishop O'Callaghan, the community found an alternative house at No 8 North Mall, arranged the rent, and moved in during the month of June that same year. Perhaps this gives some indication of Mother Aldegonde's style of leadership: quickly summing up the situation at Grenville Place, and taking action without much delay. The Sisters might be excused for thinking that here, finally, they might settle and expand, but Bishop O'Callaghan realised that if they could find a suitable house in the Blackpool area, where poverty in Cork was most acute, it would be ideal. There happened to be a building known as Farrancleary House in that area situated along a narrow lane known locally as "Keller's Lane", but officially called "Watercourse Mill Road". It was mostly in ruins and next door to a glue factory which had recently burned down! Perhaps only someone possessed of great courage, faith and foresight would see its possibilities, but Bishop O'Callaghan was that person, and in 1906 he asked the Sisters if they would take it. The Sisters viewed it with horror, and almost in panic they telegrammed Paris, probably detailing all the reasons that it was out of the question for them, but received the reply: "trust your bishop"! It had to be an act of faith! Some years later, after the Sisters had taken up residence and were working from the convent, the City Corporation changed the name of the road to Assumption Road.

A builder's firm in Blackpool, Messrs P & E O'Flynn was contracted to build the new convent. The Sisters had already won the hearts of the local people because of their devoted care of the sick, and an item from the Archives touchingly manifests this. Shortly after the workmen moved in to prepare the foundations, a letter arrived:

> July 19, 1911.
> Dear Reverend Mother and Little Sisters of the Assumption,
> We desire to place on record on this auspicious occasion – the starting of the excavations for the new convent, – our deep satisfaction and admiration of the interest and regard you have unstintingly shown to us and for the care and solicitude so unsparingly given in your nursing capacity in the hapless homes of the poor where death and sickness mars their comfort.
> We will treasure up with joyous pride the thoughts of your kindness to us this day, and we wish you, Revd. Mother and all the Sisters, many years of grace and peace to enjoy in full the blessings of a staunch and suitable building which is a long felt want.
> Jeremiah O'Sullivan
> Labourer.

The Sisters treasured Mr O'Sullivan's very warm and sincere words, and the letter must have been a real encouragement to them, as their work was initially largely hidden and unknown to a majority of Cork citizens.

The archives also contain a number of letters written to and from "Grenelle", as the Mother House of the Sisters situated in the district of Grenelle in Paris was known. Naturally it was important for the new community in Cork to keep in touch and describe some of the situations they were facing. The letters are precious documents, written by Mother Marie of the Blessed Sacrament, successor of the co-founder, Mother Mary of Jesus, and Mother Aldegonde. They testify to the warm bonds between the Superior General and the Sisters in Cork; the latter relating how were they getting on, how they were facing up to the challenges of such poverty and misery, and always, from Paris, an encouraging reminder to remain courageous and faithful. Without today's rapid means of communication and ease of travel, such letters must have been eagerly awaited.

One letter, in particular, stands out. Written by the then Assistant Superior in Cork, Sr M Bernadette, and dated April 1913, it recounts the remarkable story of how one of the Sisters had been nursing a young orphan woman of 22, who died, leaving her two young brothers utterly grief-stricken. The grandmother, by then 67 years, had a strange and surprising tale for the Sister. After the Great Famine (1847–48) she had come

as a very young child to Blackpool to beg some flour from the mill, situated just at the spot where the chapel was later to be built, but which at the time was surrounded by old, derelict buildings. The woman accompanying her declared that in future years all the old buildings and the mill would be gone, to be replaced by a convent and a chapel. "You will see it" she assured her young friend. These words passed her by at the time, but years later when she saw that what had taken place was exactly what her former elderly companion had foretold she was astounded. (When Mother Aldegonde read this letter she decided that it should be included as part of the future celebrations for the Golden Jubilee of Cork.)

The new house, situated on a hill overlooking Blackpool, must have seemed a luxury. The upper floor consisted mainly of a long corridor with bedrooms on each side, and the ground floor had several large rooms including a kitchen, storage rooms for vegetables at one end and at the other end, a large chapel, accessible both from the convent itself as well as from the driveway. A large basement area, to become known as "the Catacombs", was later arranged to house the novices for a time. There was some land adjoining, which eventually became a garden, and a place of burial for the Sisters.

We have a glimpse of some other developments in Assumption Road from a summary page written by an unnamed Sister, possibly as a contribution to future archives. Mother Aldegonde, having ensured that the community would be well housed, now turned her attention to the Chapel. She determined that the Tabernacle should be as rich a home for the Blessed Sacrament as possible, and word went round to this effect. The result was a gold lined tabernacle, the floor of which was studded with gems: "70 gold sovereigns and 200 wedding rings". The Tabernacle and altar were placed in a bright and spacious sanctuary, thanks to a very large gift of money donated by a local woman. These magnificent gifts of precious jewellery and money testify to the deep faith of the people of Cork, and, no doubt, gratitude to the Sisters and appreciation of what they were offering to the people. Other generous benefactors turned up: a chalice was donated by a Reverend Dr O'Mahony of All Hallows in Dublin – a gift of his mother for his first Mass in 1864 – according to the note.

The beautifully proportioned sanctuary was also enhanced in the following way. One very grey and dismal afternoon the doorbell resounded

through the house. An elderly woman, extremely wet, shabbily dressed and bedraggled looking stood there, announcing that she wished to donate a stained glass window for the chapel. Mother Aldegonde was summoned and not a little surprised, accompanied the woman over to the chapel to find out where this should be placed, and if, indeed, the offer was genuine. The woman walked straight up to the sanctuary, and pointed out the spot. "I want it there!" she declared. "But we have kept that spot for St Michael," objected Mother Aldegonde. "My husband's name was Michael, God rest him", the woman insisted. And so it happened! The unnamed woman was included among the benefactors prayed for daily by the Sisters from that day on. A second window, dedicated to St Mary Magdalen, also a patron saint of the Congregation, was kindly donated by a Mr O'Callaghan. The generosity and faith of the people was a never ending source of gratitude and amazement for the Sisters. The chapel itself was blessed and opened on 7 October 1945.

The finances of the community just about covered monthly expenses, with no surplus for any emergencies. Quite often the Sisters charged with "questing" had to don their white aprons, take down their black "mission bags" and set off to visit a sick person or family in need of care. The needy, of course, inevitably took priority, but God always provided! For example, the end wall of the garden was in very bad repair, so Bishop Cohalan kindly gave money for it as well as for other external repairs. Later a legacy covered the cost of paving the hallway with terrazzo and providing more space for the Daughters of St Monica.[2]

The War of Independence fought between British army troops and Irish guerillas brought about much slaughter and destruction, and Cork city and county experienced much turbulence. Including the burning of the City centre. However once peace came it became possible to envisage great improvements in the lives and conditions of those whom the Sisters nursed, and some urban planning was introduced:

'In 1921 WT Cosgrave, Prime Minister, announced some important

2 Fr Pernet was, from the start, anxious to have ways of bringing lay people, connected with the communities, together. The Daughters of St Monica consisted of working class women, mothers of families where the Sisters nursed. Men joined Fraternities.

> changes in local government: rates were to be reduced, the old "poor law" unions were to be abolished and each county should replace them with one "home" and one well-equipped hospital. He hoped to eliminate bureaucracy so that "a far greater proportion of the money collected for the benefit of the poor will reach those for whom it was intended than was hitherto the case"'.
> Excerpt from *Judging WT Cosgrave*, by Michael Laffan, as quoted in the *Irish Times,* 18 October 2014.

Cork's inner city slums were cleared by the municipal authority from the 1920s onwards, and their inhabitants re-located in housing estates on the periphery of the city -especially on its north side where there was more space to expand. However ,it was only very gradually that the authorities began to realise that providing new houses without other amenities would never be the complete solution to the difficulties faced by low income or unemployed households. In fact, both in Blackpool and later in Mahon, the Sisters were the catalyst for building that sense of community which gives local people the courage and initiative to create the resources needed.

Assumption Road Convent began a new career as a Novitiate at the start of the Second World War. Up to that time religious formation took place in Woodlands, a convent near London. However, as bombs began to fall over England there were grave fears that the country might be invaded, especially after the disastrous forced evacuation of troops from Dunkirk in June 1940, so Mother Aldegonde took the momentous decision to get permission to establish the novitiate in Ireland. Postulants by now were accommodated in Dun Laoghaire but there was no extra space in Dublin for novices, so the Cork convent had to oblige. The "catacombs" space already referred to underneath the Chapel was converted, and beds and bedding procured from various religious communities in the city.

Among the archives is a lively and amusing account of how all this came about, including the rush to obtain the Bishop's consent. Time was of the essence, as across the water the war was developing. The two Sisters charged with contacting the Bishop needed much determination! They rang his office but were informed that he was on his Confirmation rounds, and in Bandon at that time. Off they sped in a great rush, caught

an early evening bus to Bandon, but to their consternation on arrival, discovered that he was now in Enniskeane, a small town not far away. A young woman drove them there but the Bishop was in the Church, so they were obliged to wait about an hour in the Presbytery, much to the mystification of the curious housekeeper! However, Bishop Cohalan quickly gave his consent, and before driving back to Bandon to catch the last bus to Cork they wanted to tell Mother Aldegonde the good news. The only public phone was in a pub cum garage. When they got through to Dublin and explained to Mother St George where they were, a gasp of shock was audible down the line. Nuns in a public house! No, no, they quickly assured her. The public house was by now empty and only the garage was still functioning. Big sigh of relief from Dublin! After all, what if the newspaper had found out? Their kind driver provided them with a large bag of chocolates to sustain them for their journey back to Cork, and they arrived safely home at a late hour. Not many days later, the novices arrived from Dublin.

The local Mass-going congregation at Assumption Road, accustomed to seeing a large number of nuns all in black were intrigued by the sight of white veils in the chapel some days later. One woman called these mysterious apparitions, "the white things", for want of a better description, and another, clearly more knowledgeable declared that these strange beings "were the makings of nuns"!

Some separate provision was now needed for 2nd Year Novices. During this second year they would be experiencing the "mission", accompanying experienced Sisters to the homes of the sick and poor. Sr Christopher was given responsibility for these young Sisters, and moved to Cork. By now, growing numbers required that novices double up in the already small "cells", until every spare inch was occupied. What was to be done? Another suitable house could not be found. But once again, God provided! A wealthy man, Mr William Dwyer, of the large Sunbeam Wolsey factory nearby, on hearing of the problem, phoned one day to ask "Why did you not come to me?" He was already a generous benefactor to the poor. So there and then he took over. A site was selected in the garden beside the house and a new building quickly erected. Later he arranged for the chapel to be freshly painted.

Meanwhile Mother Aldegonde was anxious that Sisters get some train-

ing in nursing. The Sisters of Mercy, in their hospital south of the river, near Grenville Place, kindly agreed to allow them to work for six months on the wards, until the decision was taken that Sisters should train professionally. The first to have this opportunity in Cork was Sr Francis Kieran, later Sr Maura Doheny, the second Provincial Superior, succeeding Mother Christopher who had been appointed when Ireland became a Province.

Novices continued to fill the ranks, but fortunately every three months some advanced to their First Profession, so their spaces became available, but only for a time, as they were quickly filled by new novices! Religious vocations were very plentiful in those days. But a more permanent solution would have to be found for the lack of space.

In 1943 Mother Aldegonde heard about Mount St Joseph, a vacant Monastery in Clondalkin, Co. Dublin, just a few miles outside the city boundary. Permission for a novitiate had already been granted by the then Archbishop Dr. John Charles McQuaid, and he encouraged her to procure it. With a lot of financial help from the Congregation, it was eventually bought, but needed extensive repairs. Finally, on the Feast of the Holy Rosary, October 7, 1947 the novices, under Mother Joseph Aloysius, together with two other Professed Sisters, Sr M. Peter and Sr Columcille, departed from Cork and arrived at their new home. There was naturally a deep void in the Cork community for a time, although the 2nd Year Novices remained for some years.

In 1949 Cork celebrated its Golden Jubilee with great joy and at great length. One day was reserved for the Bishop and clergy, with the celebration of what was then known as a Solemn High Mass followed by lunch; the second day was for the Sisters, and the third day for the local people including children, who entertained everyone with some Irish dancing. A local detective played the Irish pipes!

In early April 1952 the 2nd Year Novices left Cork for Sevenoaks, Ballyfermot, a newly acquired property, whose foundation had been requested by Archbishop McQuaid because of the large number of young families being settled in the area. Once again the Cork community was greatly depleted, but everyone was pleased that these young Sisters now had their own community with a wide, very diverse mission field in west Dublin. In the 1950s the Cork community was presented with two motor scooters by a kind benefactor. It appears that the Bishop did not approve of them hav-

ing a second car as he realised it would distance them from the people, but scooters would be acceptable.

After such eventful years daily life resumed its normal way. Families were visited, sick people nursed, and sewing classes begun for local women. From Cork Mother Christopher left to go to New Zealand in 1957, following in the footsteps of another Cork Sister, Sr Columcille two years previously. The archives recount the many Sisters celebrating Golden Jubilees, and then one by one, the passing to the Father of older Sisters who had held the memories of the earliest days. All were buried in the little cemetery at the end of the garden.

In 1968 a Steering Committee including Sisters Angela Lennox and Brigid Fogarty was formed in Blackpool to discuss how to respond to the needs of the local people. A Community Centre was eventually set up. Medical services established locally as well as services and activities for pensioners and for young people were priorities. The Blackpool Community Cooperative Resource Centre was established in the centre of Blackpool village and every Sr., active in any way, was involved. The number and variety of services and activities for local people is astonishing to read. From the start the philosophy behind it was to ensure that the Centre belonged to the people and responded to the physical, social and spiritual needs of all age groups.

When public health services were reorganised by the government, Sisters found themselves nursing in all the surrounding estates as well as Blackpool itself. For this they received a small grant, and another for the Home Help service, organised by one of the community. However, as always, these sums barely covered the costs and other forms of fund raising were needed, and organised with generous help from many local people over the following years.

Another historic occasion was the celebration in 1999 of the Centenary of the arrival of the Sisters to Cork in 1899. Sr Rose Patricia McHugh wrote an interesting account of the history up to that moment, including some old photographs taken from the Little Sisters of the Assumption archives, which most Sisters would not have seen previously. It would be the last big event in the convent to host so many people.

We work for the coming of the Kingdom among the workers and the

> poor by means of a certain form of presence, by acts of solidarity and service and by sharing to some extent in their conditions of life. (*Rule of Life* 9b)

Where the people moved the Sisters followed. The General Chapter of 1975 laid much stress on "proximity to the people", rather than living in large convents somewhat isolated from daily life, and this Chapter decision greatly influenced the Province. One initiative, spearheaded by Sr Brigid Fogarty, was made that a small group would start a new community where a large housing area was being constructed, called Mahon. This came to pass in 1981. Mahon is an area at the south eastern side of Ireland with a population of over 13,000. It gets its name from Lough Mahon, a wide stretch of the upper section of Cork Harbour and is just south of the older, more affluent suburb of Blackrock. Around the same time another group went to Mayfield, another large housing area on the north side. Then two older Sisters moved for a time to Madden's Buildings, Blackpool, little streets of small terraced houses where mainly elderly people lived. In this way the community in Assumption Road was greatly reduced.

Reading the "signs of the times" it became clear that because of diminishing numbers and diminishing strength the Sisters could not continue indefinitely in the large Assumption Convent. At one stage the numbers had reduced to four! So arrangements were discussed. The Housing Association "Respond" was building a social housing complex in Blackpool, intended for Cork City Council tenants. The Sisters negotiated and obtained apartments on two floors of the newly built complex, St Francis Gardens. Other residents of this complex include local authority tenants and a floor is given over to COPE, a Cork charity which gives services to people with intellectual disabilities. Meanwhile the Convent was sold to Cork City Council for an innovative project: Cork Foyer, involving various bodies such as the Vocational Education Committee, FAS, the Health Service Executive. It is a transitional, residential housing project for young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who are at risk of homelessness, providing a homely atmosphere and various forms of training to equip the residents for a productive life. The chapel was bought by Grafitti Youth Theatre, which is also educational in its aims. There was general satisfaction that

the entire building and its surroundings which had seen such a history of service to the Blackpool people for more than a century would continue to be of service to those in need.

In Mahon the Sisters have become very well known over the years, since their arrival in 1981. The emphasis has always been on social and community development. In the beginning they concentrated on visiting each house as new residents moved in, getting to know them, their needs and their talents and what they might bring to their new neighbourhood. There has been for some time now a flourishing Family Centre, thanks largely to the efforts of the Sisters, especially the late Miriam McDonagh and Mary Malone, and their focus has always been to enable the people themselves to develop and sustain the projects and services they deem necessary to enhance their lives. When the time comes for the Sisters to withdraw from the area, they will have left a lasting legacy of community building. A key feature of the charism of the Congregation is to work so that the scattered children of God may be gathered together. (Rule of Life 19). At present the Sisters continue to provide family support and visitation as well as some counselling services.

The community house in Mayfield was always intended to have a little extra space at a time when larger houses were closing down. The Sisters who went there initially continued the work they had been doing from Assumption Road, as well as being a caring presence, a listening ear and a neighbour in this area. Over time the community's mission evolved as Sisters retired, but their presence continues to be highly valued in the parish and neighbourhood.

The nature of the of Little Sisters' presence in Cork has changed greatly during the past one hundred and fourteen years of service. But during all this time they have kept alive the spirit and special gifts of the Congregation: keeping close to families in need, supporting the efforts of local people in building up their communities, and being a prayerful and friendly presence in their neighbourhoods in collaboration with other religious and lay groups. The Reign of God develops like a tiny seed, sending out shoots in all directions, and the Congregation's motto: "Thy Kingdom Come" continues to flourish in Cork.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS FORMATION: BECOMING A LITTLE SISTER OF THE ASSUMPTION

When young irish women first began showing interest in the life of the Little Sisters they were obliged to travel to France to start their Postulancy, the first stage in becoming a Sister. This naturally was a big culture shock with the added difficulty of a strange language. At some point Fr Pernet began to express astonishment that Ireland, so Catholic a country, seemed to produce so few vocations, not appreciating the difficulties and obstacles encountered by the young Irish. In the Archives there is a very interesting type-written report, in French, entitled "The Irish Vicariate", unsigned, but probably written by Mother Aldegonde to send to Grenelle. Revealing a wise and far-sighted mind, it is very supportive of the idea of allowing the separate Vicariates to develop into separate Provinces, with their own government and formation. This was obviously a subject of discussion, since the war was soon to make overseas travel too dangerous. The writer remarked that it was difficult for young Irish women to live well in France, and when Irish Sisters were assigned to smaller communities in that country, some became very disorientated, developing feelings of inferiority, unable to communicate effectively, being unfamiliar with the French "way", French Sisters, this writer claimed, would never accept to do this, and having no personal experience of crossing over to another culture, did not understand it. All Superiors were French at that time, and all formation was in the French language! Communication to and from the Mother House was also, of course, in French,

although Irish Sisters were to be found in the USA and England as well as France. It is also possible that priests, consulted on the matter of religious vocations, would be less enthusiastic in recommending a religious order originating in France, since there were already several Irish Orders to choose from.

After the First World War the idea of setting up a house of formation in England came to fruition. First mooted by "Petite Mère Madeleine", one of the early General Councillors, who was sensitively aware of the difficulties being experienced by young English speaking aspirants and novices. Woodlands,[3] a large house situated near Blackheath, just outside London – a Grade 2 listed building – was found, and bought in 1921. It began welcoming both postulants and novices the following year. This arrangement continued until the outbreak of the Second World War. While the first months of the war passed quietly enough in England, June 1940 saw a dangerous intensification of the conflict and it seemed to Mother Aldegonde, who was Vicar of both regions and living in Dun Laoghaire, that it would be wiser for Postulants and Novices to come to Ireland, much to the disappointment of Sr M. Magdalena in Woodlands, whose preference had been for all to remain there until hostilities ceased. It had been widely thought at first that the war would last only a few months, but soon it became very clear that Europe was facing a long and destructive struggle. Proximity to London would be unwise in the longer term. But passports proved difficult to obtain, and in the end were issued only to Irish-born Sisters.

"To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often", the words of Blessed John Henry, Cardinal Newman are frequently quoted. Not so easy to live their implications! The war, from 1939–1945 was truly global in extent, and the destruction it caused was beyond imagining, entire cities pulverised, thousands on the edge of starvation before peace

3 Woodlands or "The Woodlands", as some letters called it, is steeped in history. It had been bought in the late 1700s by John Julius Angerstein, b. St Petersburgh, 1735. In fact, his mother is thought to have been the Empress Catherine the Great, of Prussian ancestry also born in Russia, who married Peter 111, outlived him and ruled quite ruthlessly. It is debateable whether any of her children were also those of her husband. Angerstein came to England aged 15, and quickly showed his business acuity and also his humanity. He died, a very wealthy man, aged 89.

was finally achieved in Europe, and later in the Pacific region. The war changed everything.

Even for the Little Sisters in Ireland and England this global war had significant consequences. Travel overseas was considered too dangerous as the island nations were cut off from the Continent, and even Ireland was cut off from England for the duration, since the Irish Government had declared the country to be neutral. So world history impinged on the Congregation, as young women wanting to enter would from that time on remain in their own country, something that Mother Aldegonde had desired from the start. Hence Postulants went at first to Dun Laoghaire, and Cork became a temporary novitiate in 1940. Happily, the Bishop of Cork was agreeable to this. The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Byrne, had died and the See was vacant. However, by the following year, a new Archbishop, Dr. John Charles McQuaid had been appointed, and he agreed to the purchase and opening of a house at Culmore, Chapelizod, bordering on Dublin's Phoenix Park, for Postulants and sick Sisters. In 1945 he encouraged the then Mother Vicar to buy a Carmelite Monastery in Clondalkin which had been vacated some time previously. The money paid for it, £4,300, came from donations from Dublin, (Camden Street), and an interest-free loan from the Mother House. However, the building, as can be imagined, required extensive renovation and repairs, amounting to the much larger sum of £18,336. Again the Mother House supplied an interest-free loan, and communities in England and the United States also contributed. Finally, after much work and effort, it was ready to welcome the Novices from Cork. who arrived on October 7, 1945, followed the next year by the Postulants. The house at Culmore was then sold for £7,000, and this money contributed to the heavy cost of the Monastery renovations. During this time the Vicariate of Ireland and England was progressing. towards each having its own form of local leadership and government. Whereas up to the outbreak of war, many decisions had been taken by the Superior General and her Council, with either the Superior General or one of the Councillors visiting the country for the purpose, more responsibility had to be delegated to the leadership at local country level. So the war, with all its horrors, suffering, destruction and death, brought about organisational change that was ultimately for the good of the entire Congregation. Mother Aldegonde had foreseen

the need for this many years earlier, in a type-written report entitled "The Irish Vicariate", referred to above.

CHAPTER FIVE

MOUNT SAINT JOSEPH

Mount saint joseph, formerly a Monastery for Carmelite Brothers, was situated about half a mile from the village of Clondalkin, west of Dublin city. Clondalkin, (from Cluain Dolcain or "Dolcan's meadow") and located near the River Camac – a tributary of the Liffey – had strategic military importance in earlier centuries. Christianity came to East Leinster in the 5th century, and its appearance in Clondalkin is attributed to St Cronán, or Mochua. One of the best known features of the village is a Round Tower, considered as one of the earliest built in the country, possibly serving as a bell tower for a Christian monastery. The present Church of Ireland, St John's, is built on the site of the first monastery established by St Cronán. With such early Christian history as its inheritance, it seemed an ideal location for a house of formation for the Little Sisters, as it had been previously for the Carmelite Brothers. (cf. Appendix).

With a down payment of £1200, and helped by the sale of Culmore to a "very nice Catholic family", plus other monies from the Mother House, the community moved once again, on 17 September 1946 to its new home, where much renovation had still to be undertaken. Mass was celebrated from the very first day, 18 September, and the altar from Culmore was used until the new white marble one was ready.

Another memorable day was 7 October, the Feast of the Holy Rosary, when Mother Joseph Aloysius arrived with the novices from Cork. Finally, the long anticipated day arrived when Archbishop McQuaid officially opened the Novitiate of the Irish Vicariate of the Little Sisters of the Assumption on 15 October, feast of St Teresa of Avila, in the presence of the Superior General, Mother St Elizabeth, Mother St Jean de la Croix one of her Councillors, Mother Aldegonde the Vicar, Superiors and Sisters from the other houses, as well as friends. This was perhaps the biggest event

in the history of the Congregation in Ireland since their arrival fifty-five years previously, and must have occasioned much joy and thanksgiving.

The Postulants settled into the former school, that was situated on the right hand side of the avenue as one faced the front door and chapel, and at first, Mother Joseph Aloysius took charge of both groups.

The following year, Ireland and England became two separate Provinces, and after the Superiors' Retreat Mother Joseph Aloysius relinquished her responsibility and, having handed over to Mother Madeleine du Cenacle from England, returned to Cork. The newly appointed Provincial, Mother Christopher, who had taken up residence in Clondalkin, took responsibility for the Postulants, assisted by Sr Brendan, (later Kathleen Daly) who came from Camden Street. and Sr Anne Finbarr. At this point the old monastic style Novitiate building was renamed St Joseph's and the Postulate St Teresa's. A year later, in September 1951, Sr Brendan was appointed to be in charge of the Postulants, with the title Mother M. Brendan of the Assumption. (In 1970 all such titles were abolished, in the spirit of Vatican II.) Later that same year (1951), Mother Ste. Elizabeth visited the new Province. The Novices got together to write to her "in their best French" inviting her to Mt. St Joseph on her way to Cork. To their great joy she agreed, and it was decided that the car would simply stop briefly at the front gate, its occupants remaining inside, while the Novices and Professed Sisters would gather at the top of the avenue. However, not only did Mother Ste Elizabeth get out of the car she insisted on embracing each Sr and saying a few words, so delighted was she at receiving the novices' letter. She returned at a later date to officially visit the communities and stayed several days.

In January of the following year Bishop Petit of Menevia, North Wales came to Mt. St Joseph and to speak about the missionary needs of his diocese. Little Sisters had already established two communities there, one in Holywell, and the other in Llanelli. He shared with the Sisters his deep conviction that the only thing capable of sustaining a missionary vocation is a deep, personal love for God, as he put it, "to be head over heels in love with Our Lord". This made a deep impression on all who heard him.

Apart from Bishop Petit, Mt St Joseph's also welcomed other distinguished visitors that same year. In August the Papal Nuncio, His Excellency Monsignor O'Hara, who had previously held that position in Romania,

then under rigid communist rule and who had escaped execution only through the intervention of the United States Embassy, visited. Then in September it was the turn of Bishop John Patrick Kavanagh from Dunedin, New Zealand. A few years previously Irish Little Sisters had accepted his invitation to establish a community in his faraway diocese.

On 22 August 1955 a Student House was finally opened, to be called Fatima. For this to happen, some space formerly occupied by the Novitiate had to be taken over. Fatima was designed to accommodate young women who were thinking of entering the Congregation, and who would complete their secondary education in Dublin while waiting.

On 1 October, the communities were fortunate to host a talk by Monsignor Vernon Johnson, an expert on St Therese of Lisieux, who spoke on Therese's understanding of "littleness" and truSt Monsignor Johnson would have been an inspiring speaker. A former Anglican cleric, it was through a chance visit to the Lisieux Carmel that he had a life-changing spiritual experience, became a strong devotee of the Little Flower, later a Catholic and then a priest.

One other notable speaker was Dr. (later Monsignor) Alfred O'Rahilly, President of Cork University, devout Catholic, polymath and later a priest, who was invited to speak about the Shroud of Turin. Author of several scientific academic works he also wrote one entitled *The Burial of Christ*.

Changes were underway. In 1958 Sr Madeleine du Coeur de Jésus returned to England to be Novice Mistress, and Sr Rose Anthony was appointed in her place. Four years later, Sr Rose Anthony herself became Provincial Superior and Sr Teresa of the Child Jesus replaced her in the Novitiate at Clondalkin, remaining until 1970.

Several other developments are noteworthy. Until 1957 the Sisters prayed the Little Office of Our Lady, and in choir. However, after the Liturgical renewal initiated by Pope Pius XII, it was decided to change to the Divine Office, the Prayer of the Church. At Christmas 1956, the Sisters were delighted to have copies of Matins and Lauds for the FeaSt However, it was not until February 1957 that Office Books were finally available from the printers. Everything was sung in Latin, but the English translations were printed alongside, making it somewhat easier for prayer. The beautiful oak wood chapel stalls were installed in March 1957 which facilitated the monastic style of praying in choir, with both sides of the chapel

alternating. Donations had been steadily arriving over time to cover the coSt In those days the Congregation lived a modified monastic lifestyle, adapted from the Augustinians of the Assumption.

The first Provincial Chapters were held in Mount St Joseph, as were some summer retreats, in the days before retreats began to be organised in purpose built Retreat Houses around the country. These "in-house" retreats with a visiting priest were usually events with wider consequences, as changes of Sisters to and from other houses or other responsibilities would be announced. and sometimes structures were altered. The Mount St Joseph novitiate community would be busier than usual, with many more mouths to feed and extra needs to attend to. Naturally the first Provincial Chapter was a landmark one. It took place in 1952 from May 24-29.

In July 1958 Mother St Elizabeth was re-elected Superior General at the General Chapter in Paris. The following year she made a "Regular Visit"[4] to Mount St Joseph. While there she made some helpful and practical suggestions regarding the accommodation needs of the Students, whose numbers were increasing at the time.

In March 1960, Archbishop McKeefry of Wellington, New Zealand, paid a visit. He was en route to Rome, for his ad limina visit and intended to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land from Europe. The Archbishop had high praise for the Little Sisters in his diocese, whose presence was helping to break down religious prejudice and intolerance, and he expressed the hope to see many more Sisters coming in the future.

1965 was the centenary year of the founding of the Little Sisters of the Assumption. The communities of Mount St Joseph hosted two important events to mark this historic moment. On the afternoon of August 9th the President of Ireland, Eamon De Valera visited, together with his wife Sinead, one of his sons – also Eamon – and his aide de camp, Colonel Brennan. It was an informal occasion, and, after a brief visit to the chapel all retired to the refectory for afternoon tea, when the President spoke of his earlier life, and answered many questions. At length his wife gently reminded him that he had another engagement at 5.30 so everyone returned to the chapel for Benediction, followed by a visit to the little graveyard where there was a grave of an unknown soldier. Mr De Valera

4 Regular Visit: Canon Law requires the Superior General to visit each house of the institute and to meet each Sister.

showed keen interest in this, asking many questions, before the party finally took its leave, and another special day in the life of the communities ended.

Mother Stephen (Brigid Shannon), whose role with the students included fostering vocations, was central to the writing and staging of a play about the Founders, again in honour of the centenary. A local woman, Mrs Brennan was the author, aided by long conversations with Mother Stephen and her assistants in Fatima. She originally intended that the play would be performed by the students themselves, however in some mysterious way Nora Lever of Nora Lever Productions heard about the play, read it, and decided that it should be produced professionally and she undertook to do this. Quickly assembling a cast of 50, rehearsals began, and the first performance took place in St Joseph's Hall, in the grounds of the Monastery, behind the Novitiate building, with an audience of Little Sisters from the various houses. Although a number of the actors were not Catholic, and one was a Jewish woman, they were deeply impressed by the characters and the story. The play subsequently ran for a week in Rathmines Town Hall.

It is perhaps worthwhile taking a few minutes to describe Mount St Joseph's, which in its own way, was the heart of the Province. Here every Sister began her religious life. Here came Sisters from other houses of the Province to make their annual retreat in the summer. From here some of the "pioneers" left to make the long boat journey to New Zealand. As mentioned above, Bishop Petit from Menevia diocese in North Wales, came one day to speak of the missionary needs of his people. So too, did Bishop Kavanagh and later, Archbishop McKeefry, both of New Zealand. Here too the liturgy was celebrated each day in choir, monastic style: Lauds or Morning Prayer, Eucharist, None or Midday Prayer, Vespers or Evening Prayer and finally Compline – Night Prayer, followed by the Great Silence, when talking was forbidden except in an emergency. Until the vernacular was permitted in Liturgy throughout the Catholic Church, each Postulant and Novice had to become familiar with saying or chanting the psalms and prayers in Latin in order to be able to participate. As can be imagined, this was quite a challenge for some.

Situated on the appropriately named Monastery Road leading to Clondalkin village, a passer-by would notice the large white wrought

iron gates opening onto a short driveway leading to the Novitiate building, and monastery proper. Just inside the gate on the right hand side was a small gate lodge occupied by an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Ashe, originally from Kerry, who took a great interest in the communities while keeping a discreet distance. To the right of the Novitiate and facing it was another two-storey building, originally the monastery school and now the Postulate. In style it was unremarkable, but the entire front faced the Monastery grounds, well kept lawns on either side of the driveway, and a flourishing Magnolia Tree, whose large creamy pink blossoms always appeared in time for the Spring "Clothing ceremonies". The lawns were lined with well-kept herbaceous borders hosting seasonal flowers, including a variety of roses. All of this was tended by Mr Fitzpatrick, while Sr Michael Canning, a member of the Novitiate community, and equally gifted in preparing meals, nursing the sick, showing the novices how to starch and iron white coiffes and other parts of the headgear, or digging the garden, took main responsibility for all the outdoor work. An extremely practical woman, she was also called on for all problems connected to the fairly ancient heating system or electrical faults, but of course, professionals would be contacted when necessary.

Opposite the Postulate and backing on to Monastery Road, was a small cemetery. the last resting place of many of the Carmelite Brothers, whose names were carved on a plaque on one of the stone walls. Some villagers too, had graves here. Later two Little Sisters, Mother Joseph Aloysius and Sr Brendan Mary, who died tragically following a road accident in Ballyfermot, in 1966 were buried there. Just beyond the cemetery was a large Rockery, built, it was said, with the help of seminarians of the Holy Ghost Missionary Order, (today known as Spiritans), whose house of formation was not far away.

The Novitiate building itself was a large 3 storey house, with two gable roofed wings, one being the Chapel, and opposite it a large hall known as St Stephen's, accessed from the outside by two sets of steps, each set leading to large double doors, locked except when the room was in use.

As the years progressed, with the renewal and aggiornamento brought on by Vatican II, life was gradually simplified. First of all, the black and white religious habits were replaced by grey dresses and veils. Monastic customs, such as the Great Silence were abolished, and the Congregation,

under the inspirational leadership of the first non-French Superior General, Mother Madeleine Termont, a Belgian, began taking on the identity of an apostolic religious body, more in keeping with the newer understanding of the Little Sisters' mission. One of the great gifts of Mother Madeleine, from an Irish point of view, was the fact that she spoke English. Gradually the marks of austerity disappeared. Carpets appeared in certain rooms, softer chairs and arm chairs replaced the hardback upright chairs in community and dining rooms. And, of course, televisions became the norm in every house. Monastic characteristics were replaced by a community life style that encouraged simpler, friendlier relationships, and more shared community prayer.

As the number of entrants began to decrease quite rapidly, it was decided to form one community out of what had been the Novitiate and Postulate communities in 1970. Sr Teresa left the Novitiate and Sr Brendan (Kathleen Daly), took charge of both the "mission house"! (former Postulate) and Novitiate, as there was just one novice. That particular year being the first time that Sisters preparing for Final Vows would be doing so in their own countries, rather than, as formerly, in the Mother House, Sr Kathleen took oversight of this preparation too, and in September 1971, seven Little Sisters made their Final Vows in the Monastery Chapel. Just about that time, the community housing student nursing Sisters at No 50 Camden Street, closed and the students came to Mt. St Joseph. Sr Jacinta Mary O'Sullivan came back from Blackwood, south Wales, to be in charge of the unified community. Gradually again, numbers decreased as students completed their professional studies and departed for other communities. Jacinta was replaced by Nuala O'Brien, and a new chapter began to open for the community. The Novitiate building was leased to a new residential project for Addiction sufferers, the Rutland Centre, and the Sisters, after much discernment left Mount St Joseph and went to Rowlagh, a new housing project under construction by Dublin Corporation. The novices, by this time, had transferred to Sevenoaks, but after a few years it seemed no longer a necessity to set aside a particular community for initial formation. Communities also began to examine how they might associate lay friends and neighbours in their particular charism and spirituality. Groups were invited to come together in Cork, Galway and Dublin. Members of these groups, "Friends of the Little Sisters" are invited to As-

semblies, and otherwise to contribute to Province reflections.

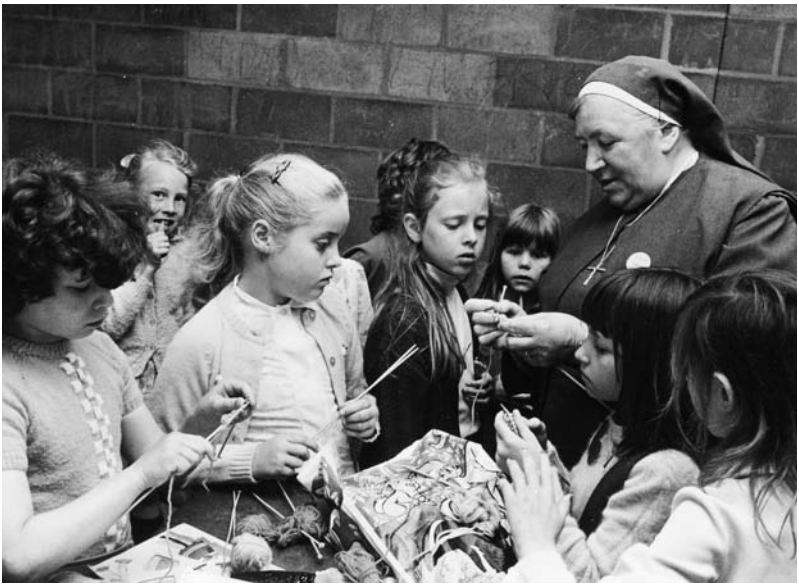
> Within as well as outside the community we strive to welcome each one in such a way that he or she may truly live, be recognised and become open to others. We are also attentive to the unloved and to those who meet with nothing but indifference; the acts of love and solidarity we witness help us in that.
> (*Rule of Life*, 57)

Postulants in Culmore, 1940s

Clothing Ceremony, Clondalkin, 1950s

A group of Postulants, early 1958

Giving a helping hand, Dublin's inner city, 1960s



Lesson in knitting, Norwich, late 1960s

Cooking breakfast, 1970s

"On your bike", on a mission, Ballymun, 1970s

Famine time, Ethiopia, 1985

Young Mothers' Group, Bohermore, Galway, 2014

At an LSA event on multiculturalism, May 2016

CHAPTER SIX

EXPANSION – BALLYFERMOT

We live in apostolic communities. Together we are sent to those who have neither voice or influence in this world, so that our actions may 'speak Jesus Christ', Good News announced to the poor. We work for the coming of the Kingdom among the workers and the poor by a certain form of presence, by acts of solidarity and service and by sharing to some extent in their conditions of life.
(*Rule of Life*, 9)

Once Ireland had settled down as a democracy with well-established political structures the city of Dublin began to expand rapidly. Slum clearance was undertaken, and Dublin Corporation, as it then was, began building housing "estates" around the periphery of the city. In 1951 the Diamond Jubilee of the house in Dublin (Camden Street) was celebrated by the opening of a new house in what was then still known as Inchicore at the request of Archbishop McQuaid. A large house on its own grounds, the property of the Railway Company, Coras Iompair Eireann or CIE, was obtained. It was situated, as one Sister described it, on the road between Dublin and Culmore, and familiar to the Sisters for that reason. This was an ideal location, being very close to the new houses of families whom the Sisters would be serving, a "quickly growing and thickly populated district" as the area was described. The house, known as Sevenoaks, with its garden and adjoining field, was surrounded by "the most beautiful trees" allowing for privacy, according to "The Shamrock", the bulletin of the Irish Province. The Sisters moved in on 1 June, the Feast of the Sacred Heart that year, assisted by many friends with cars, bringing what was necessary to set up house. The Sister houses, in Clondalkin,

Cork and, of course, Camden Street, gathered what materials they could spare for this new community, and the first Mass was said on 15 August, Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. This was the first time the feast was being celebrated in the Congregation since the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption earlier that year by Pope Pius XII. The Little Sisters would be the first religious to live there among the people. Mother Sainte Veronique, from France, a well-loved woman with an extraordinary missionary spirit was appointed superior on a temporary basis and Sr Frances Kieran (Maura Doheny) became her assistant.

This new housing "scheme" as it was known, was intended for families of four children or more, moving out from the inner city tenements. Already many hundreds of families had taken possession of their houses, but facilities in the area were minimal. A school was being built where the Dominican Sisters would teach. Later the De La Salle Brothers would have a school for boys, and the Daughters of Charity another, initially for children up to 6 years of age, Before this could take place busloads of children were taken daily to the schools at Whitefriar Street in the city centre. A Mass Centre in Decies Road served as a chapel but the construction of a large church to seat 2,000 people was also in progress.

On 11 February the following year, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the 2nd Year Novices, with Sr.M. Brigid, travelled from Cork to Sevenoaks the new 2nd Year Novitiate. However, space was very limited, and several challenging years combined with much patience and effort were needed to overcome the various obstacles to extending the house. When eventually completed, there was a beautifully spacious chapel, accessible from outside as well as from the house, a large reception room beneath the chapel, and above it 12 small bedrooms, or "cells" as they were still called at that time.

In July 1961 a First Profession ceremony took place in the Sevenoaks Chapel. Sr Stephanie Mary was from Wales, and so Bishop Petit, by then a familiar figure to the Irish Sisters (cf. chapter 7, "Wales"), presided. From that day on, novices stopped returning to Mount St Joseph for profession.

Emigration from Ireland was common at the time. With such scarcity of local employment many of the men went to England leaving young mothers alone to look after house and children. The Sisters were very busy as home births were the norm. But it was the era of penicillin and

other new drugs which were such a gift for the many struck down with pneumonia and other serious diseases. Grants were negotiated with the Health Boards in Dublin and Cork to support the home nursing and other services carried out by the Sisters. Later, when a number of nursing Sisters qualified as Public Health Nurses they applied for, and received, salaried posts within the Public Health System. From the 1960s a comprehensive Family Casework Service was provided from the convent by Sisters with professional training. These Sisters were involved in developing services for young people, for the elderly and for children, as well as supporting the development of the new Social Centres.

In the early days there were very few elderly people in Ballyfermot so the Sisters concentrated on services for young mothers, such as sewing classes. Marriage preparation classes were given in Sevenoaks by one of the curates to young couples. In later years as the population aged, a Day Centre for Senior Citizens was set up, staffed by FAS workers and some volunteers and catering for approximately 40 persons, who met in the spacious hall beneath the chapel. Every year a week's holiday was arranged for them, and a few of the Sisters accompanied them, joining in the Bingo, the sing songs, dances, and so on. In April 1998 since the Sisters were moving from Sevenoaks the Day Centre closed, and about 30 of the people, along with most of the staff, transferred to a Dinner Centre operated by the Sons of Divine Providence, a religious order also serving the area.

The Sisters' gift for relationships was very evident in the many people and families befriended over the years. Local people attended Mass in the large chapel, and a number of local boys were carefully trained as altar servers by Sr Maura Doheny, among them a later Archbishop of Dublin! As there were few services for families in "lower Ballyfermot" where the convent stood, a Nursery was built on adjoining land in 1972, catering for 50 local pre-school children, with trained child care workers and managed by a local committee with the support of Sr Nellie Curtin. It was 90% funded by the Health Board, and the balance came from local fund raising. One afternoon a week a Mothers' Club met, to socialise, share experiences, and a lot of personal development and other training took place during these weekly get-togethers. This service continued until 1988, when its doors finally shut, as the time had come for the Sisters to leave Sevenoaks. By then, families had grown up and moved on. Needs changed

and other services had developed.

Finally, a celebration for all the Little Sisters took place on 15 August 1998, in Sevenoaks, to remember, give thanks, and be ready to move on. So many Sisters had given their lives lovingly and faithfully, serving the community as well as the wider Ballyfermot area. Several had died there, leaving precious memories, including the young finally professed Sr Brendan Mary Ryan, tragically killed in October 1965, when her motorcycle was in collision with a car. All of these happenings were recalled, with tears as well as laughter. Their hearts, in the Evangelist St Luke's words, "were burning within them as they recognised the Lord" who had always accompanied them in their journey. Another phase in the history of the Irish Province was ending.

Where did these Sisters connected to Sevenoaks go? Not very far! On 7 May 1999, the remaining four Sisters closed the front door of Sevenoaks for the last time and went to a house in Palmerstown, west of Ballyfermot. Sevenoaks itself was converted into private apartments. A new apartment complex was built on land adjoining the convent, and a few Sisters moved to single units there. Then Dublin City Council built a small estate of houses on land originally belonging to the Dominican Sisters and beside their school. Since the Dominicans did not wish to live there, the Little Sisters were offered a three-bedroomed house on a very low rent, with the expectation that they would be a presence to their neighbours. This was proof if any were needed that the reputation and tradition of service built up over many years to the people of Ballyfermot, was clearly recognised and appreciated by the members of the City Council. So on 11 June 1998 three Sisters, including Phil O'Daly and Eilis Murnane took possession of 12 Convent Lawns, and to this day continue to fulfil that role. They are well known by their neighbours and by the wider community, and the older Ballyfermot people remember the nuns of Sevenoaks with great affection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WALES

The establishment of Provinces in the Congregation in 1947 signalled growth, expansion and new missionary ventures. Two years after the Irish Province came into being, Bishop Petit of the Diocese of Menevia welcomed a community of Little Sisters to Holywell, a town in North Wales.

Bishop Petit, a man with a strong missionary and pastoral sensibility, had attended the great Ecumenical Council at Rome known as Vatican II which lasted from 1962–1965. Originally from London, he had been consecrated Bishop of Menevia only two years previously. His flock was widely scattered both north and south, and his deep love and zeal for the Gospel convinced him of the need for the Little Sisters, alongside congregations involved in education. However, the initiative for this venture did not come from the Bishop, but from the Irish Provincial Council. One week in early spring 1949 *The Universe,* a popular Catholic weekly widely circulated in Ireland as well as England, carried a notice placed by the Apostolate of the Countryside concerning the availability of a property in the town of Holywell, North Wales and suitable as a convent. This seemed like an answer to prayer for the Province! The Irish convents, at this time, were filled to capacity, and the leadership was having difficulty in finding a place for everyone! So a member of the Council quickly wrote, expressing an intereSt The Secretary of the Apostolate passed this on to the Bishop's Office. Bishop Petit, overjoyed to receive such a letter, wrote to Mother Christopher on 30 April, expressing his desire to see the Little Sisters in his diocese, but asked them to consider Llanelli first, as there was also a house there. However, this house failed to materialise and Holywell was chosen for a first foundation in Wales. The diocese had a house, Maryvale, which would be offered rent free for five years, and there was a second house adjoining, not in good repair but with pos-

sibilities, once the Sisters were established. Holywell was at the centre of a large industrial area, and in addition, had a very ancient holy well dedicated to St Winifrede. Many legends surround her, but whatever the exact truth of these, Winefride or Winifrede has been venerated as a saint from the moment of her death in the 8th century. Since that time, too, her Well at Holywell has been a place of pilgrimage and healing – the only such place in Britain with a continuous history of public pilgrimage for over 13 centuries. It is regarded as one of the finest surviving examples of a medieval holy well in Britain.

One can sense Bishop Petit's impatient desire for the arrival of the Sisters. This faithful and zealous pastor wrote a letter to Mother Christopher in May in which he could hardly contain his joy: "the possibility of a foundation astounds me," he wrote. "It has come about so quietly and without any fuss of any sort or any seeking from me that it is certain to me that it comes from the Lord". In August he writes to know if there were any further developments. He also writes to Mother Agnes Augustine, a General Councillor in the Mother House, to try and speed things up. Nevertheless, it had to be a case of festina lente. Many factors had to be taken into consideration. Wales was considered part of England, so the English Province would have to agree. Rome would have to give its permission, since the Province was leaving its own territory, and then there was the need to inform the Archbishop of Dublin as a matter of courtesy. From Bishop Petit's perspective, he would prefer having Irish Sisters since there were Celtic and other affinities between Ireland and Wales. Welsh people, like the Irish, have a strong sense of national and cultural identity, and the Welsh language is widely spoken. The first step – a formal document – was agreed on and signed by the Provincials of both countries in the presence of Mother Ste Elizabeth, the Superior General, the Holy See gave its agreement, and Archbishop McQuaid was happy for the Sisters to go, provided that the houses in Dublin would not be left short of personnel.

With those details all sorted, four Sisters arrived on 30 November,1949, and the intrepid Mother Joseph, (Brigid Keane) a woman always ahead of her time, was named Superior. They were very warmly welcomed by the Bishop and some of his clergy. A week later on December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the citizens of Holywell would have noticed an unusual amount of activity at Maryvale. Bishop Petit was arriving to bless

the house in the presence of Mother Christopher and her council, as well as other local superiors from Ireland. No effort had been spared by the Sisters in preparing for this event. Not only had they to find a place for and arrange their own personal luggage but they had to make a comfortable curate's house adopt the more ascetic appearance of a convent! The previous occupant's carpets were removed and the floors scraped and polished. Some painting was needed and obstacles, such as a delay in the arrival of their furniture – it being subjected to the close scrutiny of Custom Officials – had to be overcome. In addition, of course, the community wished to give the visitors a warm welcome, as well as refreshments.

Having successfully procured a house for them, the Bishop then made it his business to make their presence and work known throughout the diocese. But there were real difficulties. To begin with, no one wanted Roman Catholic Sisters to nurse them. So after some time during which there was no sign of nursing cases coming in, the community decided to pray to St Winifrede, who kindly obliged shortly after! In fact. the story of the Holywell community tells, among other things, of the "kindness of strangers", as well as of friends, of extraordinary generosity, and above all, of prayer, which, sometimes miraculously, opened one door after another.

The National Health Service provided public health nurses and Health Visitors, but the Sisters would be offering something different. So some rough edges needed to be smoothed. One wintry day in January 1951, the doorbell rang loudly. A Sister opened the door to the Superintendent of the State Registered Nurses in Flint. "Do you know that we do the home nursing around here?" she demanded. "Are you trained?" The Sister assured her that she was indeed trained, but she must ask Reverend Mother about the others. This woman then accused the Sisters of taking the work from the State nurses, and declared that any Sister not trained should not even touch a patient. She insisted that there was not enough work for the Sisters as well as the State nurses. Despite this, doctors were starting to appreciate the Sisters' work, and began urging their patients to ask for the Little Sisters as the latter could spend more time with the sick. Naturally there were difficult moments. But as time went on prejudices dissolved. The archives speak repeatedly of how "non-catholics" begin not only to send for them, but to support them financially as well as in many other ways. The Sisters themselves did their best to become familiar with Welsh

ways. While never succeeding in becoming fluent Welsh speakers, they became "Welsh with the Welsh" as far as possible. On the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2nd June 1953 they too joined in the celebrations, putting out flags like all their neighbours!

Religious communities in surrounding localities welcomed the Sisters warmly and offered Christmas goodies including Plum Puddings for their first Christmas. A turkey arrived from Ireland. The Sisters received their first patient a few days before Christmas and did night duty with her until she passed away two days later.

Gradually, as the months passed the case load built up. More people got to hear about the community. Then the Sisters received permission to begin work on a permanent convent right next to where they were living, but there would be many problems and snags along the way towards its eventual completion. There was dry rot; there were drainage problems and so on. A building fund was set up, to which people began to contribute generously through a wide variety of fund raising activities: sales, raffles, Whist Drives, and a regular tombola. Little by little the pound notes began to come in: small funds, such as £15.00, or maybe £45.00 from the proceeds of a raffle. There were some larger donations too. An added bonus was that all of these efforts served in a few short years to build relationships between the local people and the community. Finally, in 1954, the new convent was finished. It was opened and blessed on 6 July 1954, and the first Mass celebrated by Bishop Beck, an Augustinian of the Assumption.

In the meantime, Bishop Petit had been tirelessly pursuing the possibility of a community of Irish Little Sisters in Llanelli, in the south of his diocese, and his dream was finally realised on 8 December 1951, exactly two years from the date of the blessing of the Holywell house in 1949. The Bishop blessed this new house in the presence, as before, of Mother Christopher, Provincial Superior, and many of the local superiors from Ireland. It had not been an easy achievement. At first the General Council did not see the possibility of giving permission for another community. Mother Ste Elizabeth was preoccupied with finding some new superiors from within the Province. In addition, there were sensitivities. How would the recently formed English Province take it? Would it seem as if their Irish neighbours were trying to "take over" Wales? The English Sis-

ters had certainly shown no animosity at all about the Holywell initiative, but a second "foundation" from Ireland? Undoubtedly Llanelli seemed an ideal town for the mission of the Little Sisters: there were large areas of housing for working class families, and a second – smaller – church had recently been constructed in Felinfoel, where the Sisters' house would be. But in the end all fears and objections were put to rest, as agreement was reached, a site procured, and a house built, all within the space of a few years!

The tireless Bishop then set his heart on having Little Sisters in Wrexham, the Cathedral town, something he had wanted from the start. Letters crossed back and forth across the Irish Sea and the English Channel. "Tell me that you will come to Wrexham", he wrote in 1954. "Launch out into the deep..." At that time a community in New Zealand had been established, and the General Council was anxious to strengthen its presence with a second foundation in that distant country. Four years went by before a final answer came. A fine house, next door to a Catholic school had been judged very suitable for a convent. Oteley House was a large, well preserved 18th century building, with a number of bedrooms, bathrooms and other accommodation. The front windows, in a "monastic" style were particularly remarked on!

11 October 1958 saw Bishop Petit once again driving up to a house of Little Sisters, to bless this new venture, and celebrate the first Mass there. The English Provincial was among the guests. In Wrexham the Sisters faced very little opposition, unlike the early days in Holywell. In fact, most people welcomed them warmly and gave them every assistance. One kind lady brought over a home cooked meal for their first few days. The Catholic matron of the local Maelor Hospital came along with a colleague, both armed with aprons, pails and scrubbing brushes to help prepare for the great day.

Requests for home nursing began arriving very quickly. One member of the community, a trained social worker, was soon appointed as "Moral Social Welfare Worker" for the Catholics of the entire Menevia diocese. As can be suspected, this work entailed giving support to single, unmarried young adult women with babies, and arranging for adoption or fostering of children. This would not have been a particularly easy responsibility, given the general hostility to pregnancy outside marriage,

and the stigma of illegitimacy at that time. Despite its name, the fact that the Diocese was providing this service proved the concern of the Catholic Church for those in need. Social work was not well developed in Wales at this time, so Sr Ancilla, (later known as Breda Murphy), was soon very busy, working also with vulnerable families.

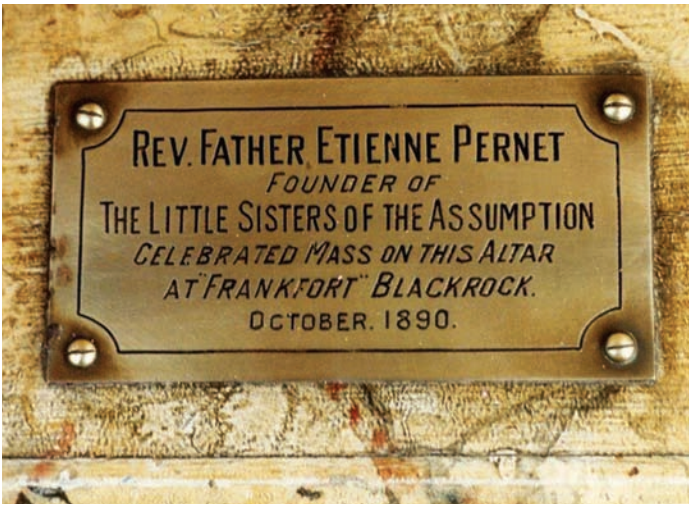
One other development is to be noted. As the Matron of the Maelor hospital was Catholic, she was asked if Little Sisters could do their nursing training there, and agreed with great delight. They would be making history being the first "nuns" to train there. Without delay two Sisters were requested to begin training in the Wrexham hospital.

The Catholic school next door had always been short of space, and had been using two ground floor rooms of Oteley House as class rooms. This continued until 1960 when the new school building was finished. However, the children had made their presence felt in their own unique way during the celebrations for the First Mass and Blessing. Refreshments had been beautifully and tastefully prepared for the guests, but the school children had not been forgotten, as downstairs, minerals and cake had been laid out for them. The children misunderstood that message and all crowded noisily and gleefully into the rooms set aside for the guests and what a banquet they discovered! We don't know if enough was retrieved for later, but the children certainly had a party to remember!

Six years later, many young Sisters were being trained in the Wrexham hospital and more accommodation was required, so in 1964 a decision was made to purchase the house next door, and a link corridor was built between the two buildings

Blackwood

Archbishop Murphy of the Archdiocese of Cardiff wrote to Mother Rose Anthony, then Provincial, in March 1968. He "had two dire needs," he wrote, one or two social workers for the Diocesan Protection Society, and of course, the presence of the Little Sisters for their other normal work as well. He had also been listening to the concerns of one of his priests, Father Long, in Blackwood. The town of Blackwood is situated in a mining area, but new factories were springing up, and the original population of 45,000 was rapidly increasing as a result of inward migration. There were about 400 registered Catholics. As a working class town it was unusual in



In memory of our Founder's visit to Ireland, 1890

Jesus show me the poor and I will run to them with a truly sisterly heart… Lord, you will help my good will, you will make up for my inexperience; you will teach me to be respectful, delicate and discreet in the face of their misfortunes. You will be the support of my hope and the price of my efforts. When the veil of charity touches the face of the poor the face of Jesus is imprinted on it for eternity.'

(Mother Mary of Jesus)