

## NOTE

### THE SISTERS OF MERCY: AN IMPORTANT CHAPTER IN CHURCH HISTORY

The foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831 at Dublin, Ireland, by Catherine McAuley, Mary Anne Doyle, and Elizabeth Harley concerns the Catholic Church in the English-speaking world as few other events do. A hundred and twenty-five years ago there were about twenty-three millions of English-speaking people in the world, living principally in the British Isles. Among them were some millions, perhaps four or five, of Catholics, living for the most part in Ireland. Outside of that country there were small groups of English-speaking Catholics in England, Scotland, Canada, and Australasia, and about half a million in the United States. Today there are ten times as many English-speaking people, at least two hundred and thirty millions, a tenth of the human race, and the majority of them live in the United States. The percentage of Catholics in the English-speaking world has increased proportionally. Among the nearly five hundred millions of Roman Catholics in the world, there are between forty and fifty million English-speaking Catholics, three-fourths of whom live in the United States. There are other millions in Ireland, England, Canada, and Australasia, while scattered groups live in other parts of the globe.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the English-speaking Church is perhaps the greatest positive factor in the history of the Roman Catholic Church during the last two centuries. The great triumph of the Church during the early centuries was the winning of the Roman Empire, an event which has influenced all subsequent Christian history. The Catholic Church of the Middle Ages won and solidly established the faith in Western and Southern Europe and thereby produced Western Civilization, which has played such a decisive role in the history of the modern world. The Church of early modern times won Central and South America and established a firm Asiatic bridgehead in the Philippines. The only event of the last two centuries which can be compared with these achievements is the development of the great English-speaking Church. Future historians will see in it an episode of world-historical import.

In the story of the rise of the English-speaking Church, there are certain figures which stand out. That of Cardinal Newman, saintly thinker, throws

<sup>1</sup> These statistics are estimates based on the figures given in editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from 1792 to the present. Sometimes these figures do not inspire confidence; for example, the repeated affirmation that the population of Ireland rose from four-and-a-half million in 1800 to over eight million in 1841.

all the others into the shadow. The less sympathetic but more dynamic figure of another English convert, Henry Edward Manning, cannot be neglected because of important initiatives in the field of labor relations. In recent times the English laymen, Gilbert K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, have served the Church throughout the English-speaking world by their gifted and prolific pens. In Ireland, Daniel O'Connell and Father Mathew were important leaders. In America, Catholic beginnings were ably presided over by the prudent and learned John Carroll, first American bishop and archbishop. Even greater is the fragile figure of Cardinal Gibbons, whose stature seems to grow with the passing decades. Among laymen, the thinker, Orestes Brownson, and the political leader, Alfred E. Smith, made outstanding contributions.

When we look to the feminine side of the English-speaking Church, we find no one to rival the services of the Irish nun, Catherine McAuley (1781-1841). England gave the Church the magnetic Janet Erskine Stuart, who deserves a place with Teresa of Avila as a lady doctor of the Church. The United States produced the beloved foundresses, Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Cornelia Peacock Connelly, while St. Frances Xavier Cabrini did some of her work in the United States. But Mother McAuley was the foundress of the largest religious society ever established by an English-speaking Catholic, either man or woman. A modern writer has asserted: "Ireland has contributed no more powerful auxiliary to the Kingdom of Christ than this glorious Order which the genius of a Dublin lady brought into being."<sup>2</sup> At first sight this statement startles. Ireland has, after all, been making contributions to the Church since the fifth century. In St. Columba it gave Scotland its apostle. The Irishman, St. Columbanus, led one of the most significant missionary efforts in the history of the Church. The Irish monks of the sixth and seventh centuries made an indispensable contribution to the foundation of Western culture. Again, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Irish priests and people, who kept the Irish Church in the fold of Peter, gave the Roman Church a base of operations in the northwest of Europe comparable to Belgium in the north and Poland in the northeast. But it can be stated confidently that Catherine McAuley's work ranks with that of the early Irish monks and of the more recent Irish heroes of fidelity. She is certainly one of the greatest Irish servants of the Church universal.

Striking, indeed, was the force of the immediate impact of Mother McAuley's creation on the English-speaking world. Writing in 1840, while he was still an Anglican and Catherine McAuley was still living in Dublin,

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Doyle, in *Truth*, December, 1931, p. 30.

Cardinal Newman said that there was no reason why the Church of England should not supply, from among its members, those requisites necessary for the life and character of a Sister of Mercy. The suggestion was immediately taken up and acted upon. The Sisterhood of the Holy Cross was founded, with the rule of the Sisters of Mercy as a model. Furthermore, in 1848, Priscilla Lydia Sellon, known as Mother Lydia, called an Order she founded the "Sisters of Mercy," prefacing "Devonport" from the place of foundation. In 1856, the Anglican Sisterhoods of the Holy Cross and of Mercy merged, taking the new name of Sisters of the Holy Trinity. But the fact remains that within seventeen years of its foundation the Order of Mercy was imitated in the Church of England.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the place to retell the life story of Catherine McAuley. It is not necessary, since competent biographies already exist. But it will be fitting to insist on certain facets of her life which particularly concern her foundation.<sup>4</sup>

Although the child of Catholic parents, Catherine was not raised in an entirely Catholic manner. This was due partly to the circumstances of the times, partly to family misfortunes. She grew up in Dublin during the period when Ireland's rulers were beginning to relax the Penal Code, which had stunted the normal growth of the Irish people and left much ignorance and misery behind it. The wretchedness and squalor which Catherine McAuley was later to succor were, in part, the consequence of its repressive measures. When very young, Catherine lost her father, from whom she is said to have inherited her forceful character, her constructive ability, and her courage. Her mother, Elinor Conway McAuley, is pictured as a woman who loved worldly fashions and pleasures. After her husband's untimely death, she found it difficult to care for her three small children and was even less able to cope with contempt for the Catholic religion. In addition, her dependence on Protestant relatives and friends apparently led her into compromises. When she came to die in 1798, she was weighed down by the thought of her carelessness and of its possible effects on her children.<sup>5</sup> Catherine was seven-

<sup>3</sup> T. J. Williams, *Priscilla Lydia Sellon* (London, 1950) pp. 9, 13, 16, 43, and 54. Mother Lydia was much esteemed by the celebrated Edward Bouverie Pusey. It was said that the first article of his creed was *Credo in Lydiam Sellon*.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest sketch of Mother McAuley's life appeared in the *Dublin Review* for 1847. Attributed to Rev. Myles Gaffney, a friend, it is rhetorical in character and inexact in detail. Mother Teresa Austin Carroll's *Life of Catherine McAuley* (St. Louis, 1866) is also marred by historical inaccuracies but it is a storehouse of the Order's spirit. The standard life at present is that of R. Burke Savage, S.J., *Catherine McAuley, the First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin, 1949).

<sup>5</sup> R. Burke Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

teen at the time and she and her brother and sister were offered not only the material comforts of life but also family affection by Protestant connections. For nearly twenty years Catherine lived in the home of an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. William Callaghan, who gave her every social advantage. Although they were not Catholics and were, at first, unfavorably disposed to the Church, her guardians did not interfere with Catherine's religious practices and Catherine for her part never faltered in her faith. She was strong enough to maintain her religious convictions and at the same time cherish her Protestant kin and friends. Her sister and brother, who had been entrusted to other families, did not follow her example. In time they conformed to the Protestant religion. This distressed Catherine but did not interfere with the intimacy between the three.<sup>6</sup>

In this difficult matter Catherine is, perhaps, a necessary model for many English-speaking Catholics. Ireland is the only English-speaking country where Catholics are in the majority. In England, Scotland, Canada, and Australasia, as well as in the United States, Catholics form a minority. In such circumstances human kindness and other secular factors not infrequently draw some Catholics away from their religious loyalties—as well, it may be noted, as some Protestants from theirs. What happened to the Dublin McAuleys happens at times in other parts of the Anglo-Saxon world. Relatively few Catholic families, probably, are without Protestant connections. The ways of passing from one group to the other are so numerous.

Catherine McAuley succeeded in holding the love and affection of her Protestant kin and friends, while keeping the affirmation of her Catholicism clear—admittedly a hard thing to do. The situation is, indeed, not only difficult to deal with but even to write about, since the better elements on both sides are apt to be rigid and intransigent. Still, some rise above the levels of mere controversy. No one can fail to admire the charitable Protestants who gave the needy McAuley children homes. No one can find fault with Catherine's gratitude to them. In the case of her own guardians, the story has a Catholic ending. Catherine brought so much help and comfort to the old age of her foster parents that in the long run they were inspired with the desire to be what they witnessed in her. Her presence brought them at last into the Catholic Church to the delight of their ward. Catherine also had the happiness of seeing her sister return to the Catholic fold. Her brother, who long survived her, seems to have died a Protestant. During her lifetime Catherine never ceased to cherish him with a sisterly affection, even though he permitted himself at times to ridicule her charitable projects

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 33 ff.

and her religion. Catherine was convinced that the Catholic Church is the sole true Church of Christ and that in it alone is to be found the fulness of revelation. But she came to believe that, in post-Penal Dublin, she could hope to win the souls dear to her, though in error, only by showing the divinity of her religion by charity, kindness, and holiness. She felt that the Church needed many holy souls to attract to her fold the other sheep of Christ. She herself was such a soul and her spirit worked in her daughters.

Another point worth noting in regard to Catherine's background is that she was by breeding, if not by birth, more Anglo-Irish than simply Irish. This was also true of some of her early lieutenants, especially Mother Mary Clare Moore, the English foundress, and Mother Mary Xavier Warde, the American foundress. These three truly great ladies differed much in character and natural gifts, but their social background was that of the Irish gentry. They and others like them were able accordingly to give the nascent Order an aristocratic cachet which had more than a little to do with its phenomenal expansion and explains the reception accorded it in all parts of the English-speaking world. No doubt the majority of the Irish recruits were not drawn from the upper classes, but with Irish adaptability most of them were able to assimilate polished manners with their religious formation. We have an echo of this process in one of Mother McAuley's well-remembered maxims: "Religion refines and elevates the character. A perfect religious is a perfect lady."<sup>7</sup>

Organized religious life has been lived by communities of men and women in the Catholic Church for centuries. The nineteenth century saw a great expansion of its forms, especially among women. Indeed, the nineteenth century has rightly been called the century of the nun, of the religious woman.<sup>8</sup> Of the 732 pontifical congregations of women in existence in 1942, 571 were established in the nineteenth century. The Sisters of Mercy are, then, one of a large family. None the less, viewed after this lapse of time, Catherine McAuley appears as one of the important molders of religious life.

Yet the Sisters of Mercy are somewhat of a juridical anomaly among religious congregations. They are an example of an active, modern spirit being put in contemplative, medieval forms. That the new wine burst the

<sup>7</sup> Teresa Austin Carroll, *Life of Catherine McAuley* (St. Louis, 1866) p. 412. The background of Mother Mary Ursula Frayne, foundress in Newfoundland and Australia, has not been ascertained.

<sup>8</sup> F. J. Callahan, S.J., *The Centralization of Government in Pontifical Institutes of Women with Simple Vows* (unpublished thesis at Gregorian University); and see L. Hertling, *Geschichte der katholischen Kirche* (Berlin, 1949) p. 362.

old skins is not surprising. It is interesting, however, to find a great Order taking root, developing, and expanding with a legal structure which had been superseded in the Church at the time of its foundation. This is an indication that the juridical form of a religious order, however important and indispensable, will always be subordinate to its ascetical and spiritual foundations. Catherine McAuley had practically founded her Order, breathed her spirit into it, and put it to work before she gave thought to the legal side of the picture.

Long before the death of her foster parents had set her free to devote all her talents and energies to the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant, Catherine McAuley had begun to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The desire to relieve in all ways the wants of the poor became early a kind of holy passion with her. "God knows," she was later to say, "that I would rather go hungry than that the poor should suffer want." She lived this exalted doctrine long before she formulated it in words. One thing that grieved her especially was the fact that the charitable agencies then in existence promised help in the future but often enough could do nothing to meet an immediate and crying need. "They need help today," Catherine McAuley sadly reflected, "not next week."<sup>9</sup>

Her contacts with the inhabitants of the Dublin slums, however, soon convinced her that religious instruction was a prime necessity, in fact often more of a necessity than material assistance. Medical men rightly lay stress on the dialogue with the patient as a method of therapy. Catherine saw that dialogue in the form of catechetical instruction would bestow lasting benefit, whereas material assistance could in most cases be merely transitory. It is clear that she had early determined to devote herself and all she might possess to the material and spiritual advancement of the poor, especially poor women in Dublin.

William Callaghan, her foster father, disposed of a large fortune and was aware that Catherine would make unselfish use of what he left her. When he died in 1822, he willed the bulk of his estate to her. Riches had only one immediate effect on Catherine's plans. They enabled her to expand and develop the work she had already begun in Coolock, the Dublin suburb where the Callaghan home stood. They enabled her also to associate others with herself in these endeavors. Eventually the fortune led her to found the Sisters of Mercy. It is not improbable that she would have managed to do so even if she had not become an heiress. But the process would have been

<sup>9</sup> R. Burke Savage, *op. cit.* supra n. 4, pp. 76, 36, and 389. K. Burton, *So Surely Anchored* (New York, 1948) p. 14.

more difficult and the beginnings would have been slower and on a much more modest scale.<sup>10</sup>

Catherine was led to be the foundress of an Order by a circuitous route. This indirection was due partly to herself. It took her years to overcome the prejudice against the religious state which she had imbibed in the Protestant circles in which she lived so many years. At first and for a number of years she was determined to remain a social worker without vows or formal religious commitments. Her first associates joined her while she still held this view. Even when she had finally overcome it, her path was far from smooth.<sup>11</sup>

On the Continent in the 1820's the centralized order of women under simple vows had long been established. It was not unknown in Ireland itself, where the Irish Sisters of Charity, founded by Mary Aikenhead, were organized in that way, although as yet without Roman approval. Catherine had had early contacts with Mother Aikenhead's religious. But they occurred during the period when she was averse to all forms of the religious life. Moreover, certain details of refuge work, as practiced by the Sisters of Charity, had displeased her. With this exception, all the Irish congregations of the time were monastic in government and consequently enclosed or semi-enclosed. Catherine McAuley wanted to and did found an Order which would plunge into social service and educational endeavor. She believed with St. Teresa of Avila that God wants deeds of love and not merely words of love.

When organizing her community, Catherine McAuley considered attaching her foundation to the Poor Clares and Carmelites as a third Order. She found, however, that their rules did not meet her aspirations. The Rule of St. Augustine, followed by the Ursulines of Paris, came into her hands and impressed her as more adapted to her purposes. As this rule was also used in the monastery of the Presentation Nuns of Dublin, Mother McAuley decided to adopt it and seek her religious formation under the Presentation Nuns. From the viewpoint of spiritual formation this was a providential decision. Mother Nano Nagle had in 1775 recognized the need of an Order similar to that which Catherine McAuley was meditating. To meet the social needs of her day, Mother Nagle had created an active Order imbued with much the same spirit that has become so well known in the Mercy Order. After the death of Mother Nagle, however, the Presentation Nuns lost their active character and reverted to the contemplation which was more in accord with their rule.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> R. Burke Savage, *op. cit.* supra n. 4, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414. Cardinal Franson, when writing in 1833 about the approbation of the

No doubt the spirit of the Dublin Presentation Nuns was well adapted to form a foundress whose aspirations were so similar to those of the foundress of the Presentation. Mother McAuley was more interested in the spiritual than in the legal prescriptions of the rule. Her concise adaptation of the Presentation Rule has been called her portrait in words. It inculcates ardent charity, profound humility, tender piety, as well as sweetness and prudence. The monastic organization of the Presentation was also to leave its mark on the Sisters of Mercy. Each house of the Order was to be independent. Catherine McAuley was not to be a Mother General but rather a Reverend Mother. The Sisters of Mercy were to spread through the English-speaking world with amazing rapidity, but thanks to no central direction. That under such circumstances a marked and definite spirit was maintained is at once a fact and a mystery of grace. Viewed from another viewpoint, this independence must be regarded as providential. No centralized institute of women has ever spread as widely or as rapidly, at least in the English-speaking world, as the Sisters of Mercy. Their early communities may be described in a biological term as fissiparous. So rapid was the movement even in Catherine's time that she once whimsically remarked: "Feet and hands are numerous enough, but the heads are all gone."<sup>13</sup>

The expansion of the Sisters of Mercy to the far corners of the English-speaking world is a unique phenomenon in the English-speaking Church. Indeed, it rivals the rise of the Benedictine Congregation of Cluny in the eleventh century, of the Cistercians in the twelfth, of the Dominicans and Franciscans in the thirteenth, of the Capuchins and Jesuits in the sixteenth, and of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth.

Between 1831 and 1894, 77 independent foundations were made in Ireland.<sup>14</sup> By the latter year the Order of Mercy had penetrated to every corner of the foundress' native land. After 1894, branch houses, subject to mother-houses, continued to be established in Ireland, but no new Irish mother-

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Sisters of Mercy, speaks of "Rules and Constitutions of the Order of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary" and "such observances as Your Grace [Archbishop Murray] will think ought to be decreed, considering the object of the Society and the pious works in which it is employed." The decree of approbation of 1841 speaks simply of "rules and constitutions." It prescribes that the vows are simple. Father Burke Savage speaks of the Rule of St. Augustine as revised by St. Thomas of Villanova (*ibid.*, p. 108).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sister Mary Josephine Gately, *The Sisters of Mercy: Historical Sketches* (New York, 1931), and her *Supplementary Manual to the Sisters of Mercy: Historical Sketches* (New York, 1931). These two works, although they do not pretend to offer a history of the Mercy Order, are, it appears, the only works on the history of the Order as a whole. Our sketch of the diffusion of the Sisters of Mercy is based on the *Supplementary Manual*. Despite limitations, these works are fundamental. Sister Mary Josephine does not indicate the source of her information but it seems reliable.



houses were founded. The field had been occupied. The number of 77 foundations in 63 years is sensational, when we think of the difficulties attaching inevitably to pioneering. The Sisters of Mercy surely answered a need. One of the curiosities of this rapid expansion in Ireland is that one of the Irish foundations was made from England.<sup>15</sup>

In England the expansion was almost equally swift and, if we consider the relatively small number of English Catholics, even more surprising. Between 1839 and 1927, 45 independent foundations were made in England, the first at Bermondsey, Southwark, London, in 1839. In the United States, between the foundation in Pittsburgh in 1843 and 1922, there were 61 foundations. In Australasia (Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania) there were 29 foundations between 1846 and 1901. Scotland shows 4 foundations in the nineteenth century between 1849 and 1871. According to a recent publication there are now 9 Convents of Mercy in that country, where convents and Catholics are not numerous.<sup>16</sup>

In Canada the foundations of the Sisters of Mercy are even less numerous than in Scotland. In the whole vast country, where there are so many religious, there are only about 230 Sisters of Mercy, all in Newfoundland, where the first overseas foundation was made in 1842. Reasons for the failure to expand in Canada are obscure. Perhaps it may be traced to the number of Canadian foundations which admit English-speaking nuns. The Grey Nuns of Mother D'Youville, for example, although originally a French-Canadian foundation, have English-speaking branches. It is of interest to note that there are a number of Mercy Hospitals in Canada conducted by religious of other Orders. English-speaking Canada is unique in the Anglo-Saxon world for the paucity of its Sisters of Mercy.<sup>17</sup>

It is impossible to ascertain the exact number of Sisters of Mercy in the world, although accurate figures for the United States are available. There are 14,935 Sisters of Mercy in the United States, if novices and postulants are counted: 6,233 professed religious belong to the Union of 1929, which has, in all, 297 novices and 204 postulants; and in the seventeen groups outside the Union of 1929 there are 7,481 professed religious, 436 novices, and 284 postulants.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This was Belturbet, founded in 1868. At the present time some American congregations maintain foundations in Ireland.

<sup>16</sup> *Directory of Religious Orders, Congregations and Societies of Great Britain and Ireland* (Glasgow, n.d.) pp. 383 f.

<sup>17</sup> Statistics for Canada from *Official Catholic Directory* (New York, 1956) pp. 46, 89, and 114 of the Canadian section. It has been suggested that state control of education and charity in the Dominion made it a less attractive field of endeavor for the Order.

<sup>18</sup> *Official Catholic Directory*, 1956, pp. 802 f.

For other countries recent statistics are not available. According to one authority, in 1931 there were 3,957 professed religious in Ireland, with 497 novices (a total of 4,454). In England there were at that date 1,698 professed religious and 247 novices (1,945 in all); while Scotland had 251 in all. Consequently, there were 6,650 Sisters of Mercy in the British Isles in 1931—a large number when we consider that there are numerous other congregations of women, especially in Ireland.<sup>19</sup> According to the latest report available, in 1946 there were 3,469 Sisters of Mercy in Australasia.<sup>20</sup> These, together with the smaller groups in South Africa, South America, Newfoundland, and the West Indies, bring the grand total to over 25,000. If recent figures were at hand for all countries, this number would surely be considerably larger. It might reach 30,000.

As they are, these statistics put the Sisters of Mercy in the forefront of religious orders of either men or women from the viewpoint of numbers. There would not be more than three or four more numerous. The Order is, of course, limited to the English-speaking world, or nearly so. The few foundations in the West Indies, South and Central America, South Africa, the Philippines, and India are but a small fraction of the whole. And these places in some instances are on the fringe of the English-speaking world.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the movement had, as far as the establishment of new motherhouses was concerned, practically spent its force. The reason is clear: the Order had occupied the available territory in the English-speaking world, or practically so. It is also true that the inconvenience of the over-multiplication of independent centers was being felt. "For some years before 1916 (date of the Cloyne amalgamation), amalgamation had occupied the attention of bishops as well as superiors of Communities of Mercy in almost every country where such communities were found."<sup>21</sup>

The first amalgamation on record is that in the diocese of Elphin in Ireland in 1871. At that time a number of Roscommon houses united under Sligo.<sup>22</sup> In 1916 the convents of the Diocese of Cloyne were united at the request of Bishop Robert Browne under the Convent of Mercy at Cobh

<sup>19</sup> Gately, *Supplementary Manual*. Sister Mary Josephine does not summarize her material. The totals are the writer's.

<sup>20</sup> *Australasian Catholic Directory* (Sidney, 1946).

<sup>21</sup> Gately, *Historical Sketches*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Gately, *Supplementary Manual*. Under Irish foundations, 1846. Roscommon, Athlone, Elphin, Boyle, Summerhill, Castlereagh, and Stokestown were the convents united under Sligo.

(Queenstown).<sup>23</sup> At an undetermined date the convents at Newtonforbes, Longford, Edgeworthtown, and Mohill were united. In 1920 Galwey and Gort amalgamated. Despite the large number of independent convents in Ireland, these amalgamations or generalates are apparently the only attempts made toward unification up to the present.<sup>24</sup>

Of England even less in the matter of unification is to be reported. There is one generalate which embraces the Archdiocese of Birmingham and Wales. The London houses of the Archdiocese of Westminster have a common novitiate, but apparently this does not mean a central government for London.<sup>25</sup>

In Australasia union has been effected in the form of a number of generalates. There are Mothers General at Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Wilcania-Forbes, and Brisbane in Australia, and at Wellington, Auckland, and Christchurch in New Zealand.<sup>26</sup>

In the United States thirty-nine motherhouses united in 1929. Since that date eight additional communities have been admitted. The seventeen independent groups are in the process of being organized as generalates. In nine instances, Buffalo, Cedar Rapids, Hartford, Manchester, Philadelphia, Portland, Rochester, San Francisco, and Trenton, this process has already been completed. Since many of these unions or reorganizations have been the result of pressure from outside, it is fairly certain that the members cling to their independence.<sup>27</sup>

The works of the Sisters of Mercy are numerous. The medieval Order of Mercy, a masculine Order for the most part, specialized in the redemption of captives. This modern Sisterhood embraces in its scope all classes, but especially the masses in the crowded cities of the industrialized world—masses often the prey of ignorance and vice. It must be noted that, although many Sisters of Mercy are Irish or of Irish descent and although the Irish race has spread to every corner of the English-speaking world, Mother McAuley's children have never limited their apostolate to the Irish, even to the degree that St. Frances Xavier Cabrini limited her endeavors to the Italians. The result is that not only have Mercy nuns ministered to all the

<sup>23</sup> Gately, *Historical Sketches*, p. 46. The union of Cobh, Charleville, Macroon, Buttevant, Kanturk, and Mallow was effected November 24, 1916.

<sup>24</sup> Gately, *Supplementary Manual*. Under Irish foundations, 1869. Newtonforbes absorbed its founding house, Longford; under 1840 for Galwey and Gort.

<sup>25</sup> *Directory of Religious Orders, Congregations and Societies of Great Britain and Ireland*, p. 375. There are more than a score of Convents of Mercy in the London area, Westminster, and Southwark.

<sup>26</sup> *Australasian Catholic Directory*, 1946.

<sup>27</sup> *Official Catholic Directory*, 1956, p. 802.

nationalities which are united in the English-speaking world, but the present membership of the Order is by no means exclusively Irish.

The variety of the activities to which the Order of Mercy devotes itself in education and the relief of suffering is great. The Sisters serve the poor, sick, and ignorant. They teach, nurse, and catechize. They conduct orphan asylums, homes for the aged, residences for working girls. They superintend day nurseries and summer camps; they teach in Christian doctrine vacation schools and catechetical schools. They have refuges for Magdalens, convalescent homes, secretarial schools, and social service centers. They visit the sick in their homes and prisoners in their cells. They conduct maternity hospitals and, in at least one instance, they care for a leprosarium.<sup>28</sup> In the United States the Sisters of Mercy have developed and are enlarging and perfecting a complete system of feminine education. They have more than a score of colleges, over two hundred high schools, and nearly a thousand grammar schools. They number their college students in the thousands, their high school students in the tens of thousands, and their grammar school pupils in the hundreds of thousands. The Sisters of Mercy take care of many thousand colored patients in the one hundred and eleven hospitals they conduct in the United States. Many thousand Negro children are numbered among their pupils.<sup>29</sup>

The thrilling events in Mercy history are numerous and some of them must be mentioned here. In 1854, thirteen years after the death of Mother McAuley, Bishop Thomas Grant sent, with a single day's notice for packing, five Sisters of Mercy to assist Florence Nightingale in the hospitals which were caring for the wounded in the Crimean War. The London five were followed later by ten Sisters of Mercy from Ireland. When the first five under Mother Mary Clare Moore arrived on the shores of the Black Sea, they were assigned to windowless and unsanitary barracks. The Sisters suffered from hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing suited to the rain, snow, and biting winds of a Crimean winter.<sup>30</sup> But they did their job none the less and won the gratitude and affection of the soldiers and especially of Miss Nightingale, who greatly esteemed Mother Clare. Miss Nightingale wrote to her: "Dearest Reverend Mother, I am sure that no one even of your own children values you, loves you and reverences you more than I do." She also frankly confessed: "You were far above me in fitness for the General

<sup>28</sup> For a summary of the works of the Sisters of Mercy, cf. "Meet the R.S.M.'s," by Sister Mary Rose Edward, R.S.M., *Catholic Digest* 13 (1948) 44. The author is concerned principally with the Union of 1929.

<sup>29</sup> These figures are based on the article mentioned in the preceding note and on the *Official Catholic Directory*, 1956.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the London *Tablet* 203 (May 8, 1954) 437 ff.

Superintendency, both in worldly talent of administration and far more in the spiritual qualifications which God values in a superior." Of the nuns as a group she wrote: "The Catholic Orders offered me work, training for that work, sympathy and help in it, such as I had in vain sought in the Church of England."<sup>31</sup> It may well have been the close contact with Mother M. Clare which brought Miss Nightingale to the gates of the Catholic Church. Although she remained an Anglican, she wrote to Cardinal Manning: "The Roman Catholic Church is my mother although she will not acknowledge me as her child."<sup>32</sup>

What the European Sisters of Mercy did in the Crimean and Boer Wars, their American Sisters did in the Civil and Spanish-American Wars. During the Civil War the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy were put in charge of the Stanton Military Hospital in Washington, D.C., and Abraham Lincoln wrote them a blank check on the War Department for supplies. Sisters of Mercy staffed Union hospital ships on the Mississippi at one stage of the war. In 1862 and 1863, New York City Sisters of Mercy were with the Union forces in North Carolina. Today in many a quiet graveyard the graves of Sisters of Mercy receive on Decoration Day the grateful attention of the government, because of distinguished service rendered by their occupants to humanity and country.<sup>33</sup>

Mercy nuns have also been conspicuous for bravery in the great epidemics which have visited our country. They died in ministering to cholera victims in Chicago in 1849 and 1854. In 1862 we find them caring for smallpox

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Edward Cook, *Life of Florence Nightingale* 1 (London, 1913) 57. Miss Nightingale did not take so readily to Mother Mary Frances Bridgeman, the superior of the Mercy Sisters from Ireland. Indeed, she nicknamed Mother Bridgeman "Mother Brickbat"; cf. London *Tablet*, *loc. cit.* supra n. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. L. G. Fink, "Catholic Influences upon the Life of Florence Nightingale," in *Graduate Nurse* (New York, 1938) p. 183. Miss Nightingale was unfavorably impressed by the *Maison Mère* of the Sisters of Charity in Paris: "An office to compare with which in business habits I have never seen any, either government or private in England. I think it is mere business power which keeps these religious orders going"; cf. E. Cook, *op. cit.* supra n. 31: 1, 432.

<sup>33</sup> Sister Mary Eulalia Herron, *Sisters of Mercy in the United States* (New York, 1929) pp. 13, 61, 35; this is the only general history of the Order in the United States. There are, however, many excellent monographs on individual communities, e.g., *Memoirs of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy* (New York, 1918); *Seventy-Five Years in the Passing with the Sisters of Mercy, Providence, Rhode Island* (Providence, 1926); Sister Mary Loretto Costello, *Sisters of Mercy of Maryland* (St. Louis, 1931); Sister Mary Veronica McEntee, *Sisters of Mercy of Harrisburg* (Philadelphia, 1939); Sister Mary Innocentia Fitzgerald, *Historical Sketch of the Sisters of Mercy in the Diocese of Buffalo* (Buffalo, 1942); and Sister Mary Ildephonse Holland, *Lengthened Shadows: A History of the Sisters of Mercy of Cedar Rapids, Iowa* (New York, 1952).

victims in Cincinnati and for those sick with yellow fever at Natchez. They performed heroic services at Philadelphia during the influenza scourge of 1918. In 1861 they ministered to those made homeless by floods in Sacramento, as they did to those burned out of their homes by the Chicago fire of 1871.<sup>34</sup>

Despite their services to Protestants as well as to Catholics, the Sisters of Mercy have had to face anti-Catholic prejudice in various parts of the United States. In 1843 Mother Mary Xavier Warde, the American foundress, came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the invitation of Bishop Michael O'Connor, to open the first American Convent of Mercy. Among many difficulties she had to contend with outbreaks of religious bigotry. Her most dramatic moment, probably, came in 1855 in Providence, Rhode Island. The mayor of the city, a Mr. Knowles, waited on her to tell her that he was powerless to prevent the Know-Nothings from proceeding to acts of violence against her community. Mother Warde knew that he was trying to frighten her out of the city. He did not know with whom he was dealing. Mother Warde calmly told him: "If I were chief executive of municipal affairs, I would know how to control the populace." She added that the nuns would remain and die, if necessary, rather than leave their assigned field of duty. Mother Warde, however, had no intention of passively accepting eviction. She had mobilized the Bishop of Providence, the Protestant gentleman from whom she had purchased the property, and a sturdy band of Irish immigrants. The fervor of the angry mob cooled suddenly when the Protestant gentleman informed them that armed men were waiting to receive them in the garden. Mother Warde had exacted from her guards a promise not to fire except in self-defence. She even rendered tribute to the mob when she told her nuns: "They have, no doubt, the best of motives but their judgment is clouded by prejudice." The Sisters at Providence were not further molested. This episode could be paralleled by a number of others and reveals the indomitable spirit of the foundresses of the Order.<sup>35</sup>

Columbus, Georgia, was the scene of a trial of a different nature. Food and clothing became very scarce during the Civil War. The Sisters there had to make tea from dried blackberry leaves, and coffee from parched corn. Both had to be consumed without benefit of milk or sugar. The only bedding they had were quilts spread out on the floor. Their shoes were kept for Sunday wear; during the week they used slippers made from old carpeting with heavy paper soles.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Herron, *op. cit.* supra n. 33, pp. 56 f., 228, 248, 171, 63.

<sup>35</sup> "Mother Mary Xavier Warde," *Review for Religious* 14 (1955) 241 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Herron, *op. cit.* supra n. 33, pp. 241 ff.

Those accustomed to dealing with religious women have noted that the spirit of the Sisters of Mercy is one of the most marked. Mother McAuley had a great love of God, which showed itself in an unshakable confidence in His fatherly protection. During the cholera epidemic of 1832 she remained the whole day in the wards of the Dublin hospital, repressing her lively dread of contagion and her marked fear of death. During the years of the foundation of her Order she remained, despite ill health, disappointments, serious sicknesses, and frequent deaths among the Sisters, ever courageous and confident. Sorrow, anxiety, and pain were her portion but they never daunted her resolute spirit. Faintheartedness in her nuns grieved her. When untoward incidents occurred, Catherine McAuley remained peaceful and serene.<sup>37</sup>

Another important characteristic, which Mother McAuley also communicated to her foundation, was her love of the poor, which we have mentioned above. "God will not be displeased with me," she wrote two years before her death, "for He knows that I would rather be cold and hungry than that the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford." For Catherine, to love the poor was to help them, to improve their condition of soul and body. This is the hallmark of her particular spirituality and with it she filled her associates. It remains the distinguishing mark of her daughters.

Charity and humility were the community virtues which Mother McAuley cherished. The Sisters were taught to avoid anything that might be in any way against charity; even the least remark on mannerism or natural defect was ruled out. The Sisters were never to say anything unfavorable about anyone. They were to show humility by their tone of voice and manner of walking, and by carefully shunning any reference at all to self. Love of the hidden life and dislike for noisy display in the performance of duty were deeply impressed on the souls of members. Except in the case of competent ecclesiastical authority, however, Mother McAuley set great store on independence in action and was quite unwilling to listen to self-constituted advisers, either lay or clerical.<sup>38</sup>

Favoring regular, simple mortifications rather than rigid austerities, Catherine was inclined to look on the sunny side of events and to try to point it out to others. Her playful, lighthearted spirit easily broke through her earnest and determined manner. She was kindly and affectionate but there was nothing insipid in her sweetness; she possessed calmness and strength in a very marked degree.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> R. Burke Savage, *op. cit.* supra n. 4, p. 150.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.      <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

In view of what has been pointed out, the question arises why Mother McAuley has not been canonized. Monsignor James Powers investigated this question some years ago and hinted that the explanation is to be sought in the natural modesty of the Irish. He also mentions a lack of miracles and, quoting our Lord's "By their fruits you shall know them" (Mt 7:16), seems to suggest that the Church should waive miracles in this case. Father Daniel Lord wrote in much the same spirit; "The permanency of her work and the deeds she taught her Sisters to do are her constant canonization."<sup>40</sup>

It might perhaps be questioned whether Mother McAuley's beatification and canonization have been unduly retarded. Although Rome has in a few cases acted with celerity, the general procedure is not designed for speed. Still, in view of the undeniable fruitfulness of her foundation, it is strange that her cause has not yet been introduced. The reason seems to lie in the lack of concerted effort on the part of her daughters and admirers. Measures have to be taken to spread devotion to servants of God who, although they have not been beatified, may be invoked privately with the object of obtaining miracles to be submitted to the Holy See with a view to beatification. Cooperation with divine providence in making known the wonderful works of grace in the souls of God's chosen ones is necessary and hastens the manifestation of the glory God has prepared for them even on earth. To encourage devotion in private to the holy servants of God is, as a rule, the first step in obtaining from God the miracles necessary for canonization. The faithful can scarcely be expected to have recourse to holy people of whom they have seldom heard. That would be a miracle indeed, but a miracle which God does not for the most part deign to work. Individuals have to exert themselves. Their zeal and interest will certainly have results if the servant of God is one whom God would like to honor.

At the end of this brief and imperfect sketch of a great Order, we may ask ourselves what rank Mother McAuley and her foundation take when seen in the perspective of general Church history. The answer is not doubtful. Catherine McAuley takes a high place with St. Macrina, the sister of St. Basil, St. Scholastica, the sister of St. Benedict, St. Clare, the friend of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Louise de Marillac, the collaborator of St. Vincent de Paul, Blessed Julie Billiart, and St. Madeleine Sophie. St. Catherine of Siena has been called the "great" Catherine. There are at least two. The rank of the Sisters of Mercy is also high. If the nineteenth century is the century of the religious women, the Sisters of Mercy are one of the most effective groups among them, perhaps unsurpassed in the English-speaking

<sup>40</sup> "Is Mother McAuley a Saint?", *American Ecclesiastical Review* 92 (1935) 498-502. Father Lord is quoted in *Catholic Digest*, *loc. cit.* supra n. 28.



world. Bishop Thomas Shahan wrote: "These armies of Catholic women move ever with a certain stately calm and precision, greathearted, clear-eyed, and fully conscious of their aims to execute them. Their annals reflect a holy monotony of service, unbroken by romantic individualism or the assertion of self or of selfish interests."<sup>41</sup> It is the glory of the Sisters of Mercy to be a very efficient unit in the forces of the militant Church.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted by K. Burton, *So Surely Anchored* (New York, 1948) p. 259.