



RELIGIOUS
SISTERS
OF CHARITY
The love of Christ urges us on

A short synopsis of the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead

Part Three



Mary is permanently invalidated

There was to be no full recovery for Mary. At the age of forty-four, she, who had been so active in the work of the Lord, was permanently invalidated. From now on and for twenty-seven years, she was to guide and govern her congregation from a sickbed, mainly by her pen. The brief of Gregory XVI dated 30 August 1833 giving final approval to the constitutions of the Sisters of Charity must have been a welcome relief to the suffering invalid.



Mary challenges the “Commission on Poverty”

Mary Aikenhead was never lacking in courage but especially when she saw the poor being unjustly treated. She gave evidence to a Royal Commission on Poverty established in Dublin in 1833. She described the scale and depth of the destitution she and her colleagues had encountered for years. I quote a few sentences: “Many in the prime of life are reduced to debility from want of food, without sufficient clothes to cover them... We found many in the agonies of death without the means of procuring even a drink and many perished without medical aid... The lanes and streets are filled with filth... there are no sewers... the poor must buy even the water they drink; it is of the worst description and tends to promote disease, as much by its scarcity as by its poor quality.”

Elizabeth Bodenham arrives

The cross under different guises was never far from Mother Mary Aikenhead’s door. Elizabeth Bodenham (1787-1859) was a member of an English Catholic aristocratic family who could name among her relatives a Cardinal, a Bishop and two Jesuit priests. She herself had been educated in France, was accomplished in Bible studies and Church history and was the author of a number of pious books. Mary, although somewhat unsure of her suitability, decided to give Elizabeth a chance and admitted her to the novitiate. In 1830 she was professed taking the name, Sr. Mary Ignatius. It was shortly after this that Mary’s own health began to deteriorate and she appointed Sr. Ignatius to give catechetical instruction to the novices.

Three Sisters sent for training to Paris hospital

Mary Aikenhead had set her heart on establishing a great hospital in which the sick-poor should receive all the aid the doctor’s skill could provide and all the comforts that the Sisters

of Charity could provide. In 1833 she sent three Sisters, including Sr. Ignatius Bodenham to the Hospice de la Pitie in Paris to be trained in nursing and hospital management. They arrived back in Dublin on the feast of St. Aloysius, 21 June, 1834. Sr. Bodenham referred to the St. Vincent's Hospital project as, "a little pious hallucination of Rev. Mother's" and she felt that it never would – or should get off the ground. She tried to persuade some of the Sisters on her return to Ireland that hospital work was a species of labour unfitted to refined and educated women. As it happened, the hospital in St. Stephen's Green was not ready for occupancy when the three Sisters returned and Sr. Bodenham was assigned once again to helping out in the novitiate.

Sr. Ignatius Bodenham appointed Mistress of Novices

With her increasing involvement in the preparations for the opening of St. Vincent's Hospital and with her own precarious health, Mary realised that a new Mistress of Novices was required. In her dilemma she turned to Sr. Ignatius who was already familiar with the workings of the novitiate. She had a personal charm and a facility in discoursing on spiritual matters and, besides, the novices liked her. So, Sister Ignatius Bodenham succeeded Mary Aikenhead in the novitiate and Mary Aikenhead continued with her preparations for the opening of the new hospital.

Preparations for the new hospital progressing

Having purchased some linen, Mary "began to cut out and arrange the various articles that would be required. She thought herself grandly provided when she could count thirty pairs of sheets and an equal number of bolster and pillow slips as the beginning of the future wardrobe. The bolster and pillow slips she made with her own hands as she reclined on her bed in Sandymount."

Trouble in the Novitiate

It wasn't until a year later and a month after St. Vincent's Hospital opened in 1834 that Mary sensed all was not well in the novitiate in Stanhope St. Three postulants were to receive the religious habit in May 1835 but the ceremony was being arranged on a lavish scale, quite foreign to Mary Aikenhead's thinking. Mary cancelled the programme. Under Sr. Ignatius, the novices were led to believe that in working for the poor they were wasting the talents God had given them. She had even urged that they press for an election of a new Superior-General. She was removed from the charge of the novices.

Elizabeth Bodenham dismissed

Not long afterwards it emerged that Sr. Ignatius had already made arrangements for a foundation in Hastings, England to which she would take the most gifted of the novices to

open a school for the well-to-do. Mother Aikenhead lost no time in cancelling the arrangements for the new foundation. But thirteen of the twenty-two novices and two professed Sisters left Stanhope Street. Mary called a meeting of her Council and the decision that was arrived at was that Sr. Ignatius should be dismissed. In August 1837 Elizabeth Bodenham left for France.

Mary Aikenhead's Letters

During her Religious lifespan, Mary wrote many letters, mostly to Sisters of Charity. Some were serious, some spiritual, some playful as when she says, "We have a real treasure of a zealous, kind chaplain here who hears the great big men's confessions before and after breakfast; so he is worth a good egg." She had just received a basket of eggs from Cork. The "great basket" as Mary calls it appears to have done a



lot of sailing in the little steamer the Inisfail, up and down between the two convents. If Cork eggs were valued in Dublin, Dublin bacon appears to have been a great treat in Cork. The following is an excerpt from a letter Mary wrote on 3 January 1837 to Sr. M. de Chantal, when trying to raise funds for St. Vincent's Hospital: "I had to get out all my begging notes, 3,000 general ones, such as I send you to look at and 500 of neater paper folded in envelopes. The fruit of this begging amounts to £35. In order to have all delivered on Christmas Eve we had to employ 18 persons... and as I had to arrange all parcels of notes to be delivered by each person, I did not lie down to sleep the night before until 3 o'clock in the morning."

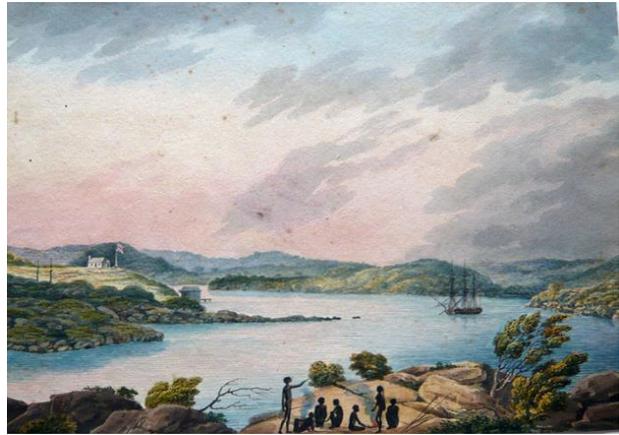
With the passage of the years, Mary was in constant pain and unable to raise her head and her fingers became increasingly arthritic. She sometimes wrote lying down. Sometimes at the cost of great pain she sat up and wrote on a little bed-table. Her arm had to be lifted for her on to a pillow and her quill pen put between her fingers. Over one thousand of her letters are in the possession of the Sisters of Charity.

Australia calling

In 1834 Dr. Polding, OSB, Archbishop of Sydney called on Mother Mary Aikenhead requesting her to send some Sisters to the female convicts in New South Wales, Australia. She promised to do her best for him before his next visit to Europe in a few years' time. True to her word, on the arrival in Ireland in 1837 of Dr. Polding's Vicar General, Dr. Ullathorne, OSB, Mary, in spite of her depleted numbers asked for volunteers. When the group of five were ready Mary, despite her physical disabilities accompanied them to Dun Laoghaire

harbour on 12 August, 1838 whence they set sail on the first stage of their voyage. Mary was heard to say, “I would gladly join the party if I were younger and in health”.

On 18 August, Dr. Ullathorne’s party consisting of four priests, three seminarians and five Sisters, John Cahill, Baptist de Lacy, de Sales O’Brien, Lawrence Cater and Xavier Williams set sail from Gravesend, England on board the sailing vessel, “Francis Spaight” arriving in Sydney on 31 December, 1838 four and a half months later. It was mid-summer in Australia. Nine years later in 1847 at the



request of Bishop Willson of Tasmania, three of those Sisters, John Cahill, de Sales O’Brien and Xavier Williams sailed in the “Louisa” towards Tasmania, arriving in Hobart at the end of six days.

Mary’s health deteriorates

In the early 1840s Mary’s health deteriorated rapidly. In the winter of 1844 she suffered from frequent attacks of bronchitis. This, added to her other maladies, left her very weak. Change of air became absolutely necessary. A house in Harold’s Cross came on the market and on 11 September 1845 Mary moved from St. Vincent’s where she had lived for 11 years to Our Lady’s Mount. She was 58 years of age and here she was to remain for the rest of her life.

Bereavement for Mary

During the 1850s Mary was to mourn the loss of some of those who had assisted her in the foundation of the Sisters of Charity. Archbishop Murray died in 1852; Miss Matilda Denis, the principal benefactor of North William Street convent died in 1854 and on Christmas Day of that same year, Mother Catherine Walsh, Mary’s companion in York died. In June 1857, to quote Donal Blake, “Yet another strong link with the past was broken by the death of Fr. Robert St. Leger, SJ.” Mary’s spiritual director in Cork, Bishop Florence McCarthy, had died on 19 June 1810, having contracted a virulent fever while attending a victim. He was forty-nine years of age.

Mary Aikenhead’s last signature

Mary’s last official act was to accept from Fr. Daniel Jones SJ, the deeds of his home, Benada Abbey, Co. Sligo which he had inherited. The agreement was signed on 4 April, 1858, the

last document to receive her signature. Mary had been responsible for fourteen foundations during her religious life.

Mary's last days

In addition to her previous maladies symptoms of dropsy appeared in 1858. Her heart was affected and gradually the spinal muscles became too weak to support the head. She died at 3 o'clock, 22 July, 1858.

After the Requiem Mass in Donnybrook chapel, a deputation from a body of Dublin working men begged as a favour, that they might be allowed to carry her remains to their final resting-place in Donnybrook cemetery.



A Nation in mourning

There were lengthy obituary notices in some of the national papers following the death of Mary Aikenhead. The following is an extract from the **Cork Examiner**, “We have to announce with deep regret the demise of this true Servant of God...The Sisters of Charity have lost a mother indeed whilst the poor have been deprived of a universal friend and the cause of charity of a zealous and successful advocate...even to the last moment of her sainted existence the noble minded Sister of Charity never forgot for an instant the objects of her pious mission on earth ...the poor...whom she devotedly loved and cherished.”

In “**The Tablet**” published in Dublin we read, “...rarely have those virtues (female piety, charity and zeal) been more happily united, than in the person of Mother Mary Augustine, or more edifyingly exemplified than they have been in her holy life and never-to-be-forgotten efforts in the cause of benevolence and piety.”

The writer of an article in “**The Nation**” published in Dublin, having alluded to the heroism displayed on the battlefields of the Crimea goes on to speak of the heroism of “the lately deceased foundress.”

“Let us, however, turn to heroism of a truer and purer type; let us bow the head and bend the knee by the bier of one who has been the victor in another and a holier field; whose glory and reward will endure when the conquests and the kingdoms and the empires of this world shall have passed away for ever.”

Extract from a letter of **Most Rev. Dr. Gillooly, Bishop of Elphin:**

“...I learned of the death of your pious and gifted foundress...There were few living saints for whom I had so much esteem and very few departed friends for whom I have prayed with so much fervour, although I feel perfectly confident that her soul was already perfectly purified by trials and sufferings before death and that she was immediately admitted to her reward.”

Let us continue to pray that one glorious day we will see Mary Aikenhead raised to the altars of the Church.

Sr Miriam Twohig RSC

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