

CHAPTER 14

FROM IRELAND TO THE SOUTHLAND

Braving the storms of the transatlantic crossing in the fall of 1860 created but small concern for the seven Dominican nuns from the monastery in Cabra, Ireland. To leave their long-established life in the cloister posed an equally great challenge. They anticipated privations and hardships in accepting the assignment to New Orleans in the United States. But they never dreamed that a war was about to break out between the North and the South. Clearly, news of a war would not have changed their minds. Through the centuries their congregation had endured many displacements and persecutions in Ireland. Exile, poverty, lack of personnel, persecution because of religious habit and religious name had been constant problems; these hardships had not kept their predecessors from maintaining their objective to live the life of Second Order followers of Dominic.



St Marys Convent, Cabra, Dublin

The story of the Cabra Dominican Monastery "is a faithful reflection of the trials and struggles of Ireland."^[1] Every Irish man and woman experienced political turmoil, war, plague and famine. Even in this environment, some pious women in Galway in 1644 opened a house known as the Convent of Jesus and Mary under the direction of Gregory French, O.P. They were recognized and approved by the Order and by the Holy See as the first monastery of Dominican nuns in Ireland since the Reformation. Because they considered education as a particularly Dominican apostolate, they supported themselves by opening a school for girls. In a mere eight years after their establishment, their cloistered life in Galway came to an end in 1652 because of Oliver Cromwell's repressive regime. They were given the option to "renounce their religious life and return to their families to live as lay people, or to choose exile...^[2] They chose the latter.

The young community of Irish nuns, fourteen in all, emigrated to Spain. There they were received in Bilbao and various other monasteries. Only two of these sisters, Mary Lynch and Julian Nolan, returned after a thirty-four year exile. Those two had come back to Galway in 1686 at the request of the Dominican Irish Provincial who wanted them to reestablish their monastery of the Incarnation. Sister Mary Lynch, now sixty, and Julian at seventy-five, had to call upon their last reserves of mind and body to start again. Julian was the prioress and Mary became subprioress and mistress of novices. Together they refounded the Convent of Jesus and Mary and invited others to join. As their numbers increased they were able to resume all their monastic practices.

But there was still no rest for vowed religious. A new penal code made effective in 1698, banished "forever" all clergy and women religious. This time the sisters decided to remain, opting to stay in Ireland where they lived with friends or relatives in the Irish countryside.^[3] At other times they remained in the monastery. For safety reasons they altered their way of life by removing all signs of the cloister, wearing the garb of the day and engaging in domestic work for their support. This changed way of life proved extremely traumatic.

These adverse conditions affected the two foundresses the most. Julian died in these surroundings in 1701 and Mary took on the burden of prioress. The difficulties the nuns endured in Galway also disturbed the Irish Provincial. He contacted the Archbishop of Dublin, Edward Byrne, to ask if eight of the nuns in Galway might live in his diocese where they could more easily live their monastic life in the anonymity of a large city. Permissions from both the archbishop and the Master of the Order were forthcoming.

In the spring of 1717, the eight led by Sister Mary Bellew, who was appointed by the Dominican provincial, found refuge in Channel Row, near Dublin. When the penal laws were rigorously enforced, the nuns wore secular garb, used their baptismal names and engaged in dress-making for a living. They were known as "Mrs. Bellew's family."^[4] Within the house the "seamstresses" lived their monastic life. This new monastery of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Channel Row was recognized by Church and Order authorities as a bona fide cloistered community, completely independent of the former convent in Galway.

Young women continued to join them despite their clandestine existence. When a sufficient number entered, they opened a school and took in boarders. Many of these boarders were children of the gentry who had not fared well under penal laws. By the middle of the eighteenth century the small community could boast of twenty-eight members. They gladly paid the fines levied by the government for continuing to have the liturgy celebrated in their monastery. As the years passed, with increased pressure of the penal laws and impoverishment of their benefactors, their numbers declined until only three nuns remained. Those three moved again, this time in 1805 to Clontarf where they again opened a school.

The nineteenth century brought better times. Women religious were again able to wear their religious garb. When Mother Ann Columba Maher was elected prioress, she was predicted to be "one whose mission it will be to restore her community to all its full vigour and splendor."^[5] However growth was slow and the years at Clontarf were characterized by material and spiritual

poverty. They could not keep their school open because of the dearth of nuns and there were so few priests that they could celebrate Mass only once a week.

Cabra became their next home in 1819. The five members from Clontarf moved to Cabra where they opened a school for the poor. The second quarter of the nineteenth century brought problems of a different nature. Because of the difficulty of obtaining Dominican friars as chaplains, with the nuns reduced in numbers and desperately poor, Mother Columba's successor, M. Magdalen Butler, agreed to transfer the group from the jurisdiction of the Dominican Master General to that of the Archbishop of Dublin. Their very survival was at stake. They also adopted the Little Office instead of the Divine Office in order to give more time to the instruction of the poor. Vincentian priests instructed the group and assisted them to draw up a constitution.^[6] In twenty years, fifty-three new members made profession. Finally came a period of comparative prosperity. Even the prosperous years brought an unexpected change. In 1836, a group from Cabra decided to set up a new monastery on Mount Street, independent from Cabra. Both operated schools for girls greatly in demand in Irish society. The Mount Street monastery and school eventually moved to Sion Hill.

Even this diminution in numbers did not deter Mother Anne Columba Maher from trying new ventures. In 1844, the Cabra nuns opened a residential school for those "totally or partially impaired in hearing and in speech," the first of its kind in Ireland.^[7] This type of school proved to be a blessing for the people of Ireland and became a model imitated by branch monasteries from Cabra. The decade of the 1860s for the Cabra nuns has been designated by some as their "apostolic decade." Despite their small numbers and their cloistered status, this small monastery looked outward to assist where needs were great and requests were mounting for religious women in the schools. In that ten-year period, members from Cabra sent forty-two nuns on mission to four continents. They went to Lisbon, Portugal; Capetown, South Africa; Adelaide, South Australia; New Orleans, United States.

The call to New Orleans came from the parish priest at St. John the Baptist Church in that city. Father Jeremiah Moynihan welcomed the seven Cabra Dominicans who arrived in 1860. They were Sisters Mary John Flanagan, founding prioress, Mary Magdalen O'Farrell, subprioress, Mary Hyacinth McQuillan, Mary Xavier Gaynor, Mary Ursula O'Reilly. These "choir" or teaching sisters were joined by two lay sisters, Osanna Cahill and Bridget Smith, who did the cooking, washing and manual labor. These pioneers served in a parish school, an unusual practice in the United States because most communities of women religious began with an academy of their own. Only later did teaching in parish schools become common for congregations of sisterhoods.

Jeremiah Moynihan had long been working to bring sisters to New Orleans from Ireland. His archbishop, Antoine Blanc, also favored the plan; the parish priest was willing to buy a house for the sisters. First the Sisters of Mercy had received the call to serve, but did not wish to send anyone from Ireland. Early in 1860, Sister M. DeRicci Maher, Prioress at Cabra, received a request from Moynihan. She wrote to her congregation, "The sisters appointed to go [to New Orleans] will have a good deal to endure . . . and will be solicited from the names given in for the purpose. We will pray the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin for the purpose for the next ten days."^[8]

Mother Mary John Flanagan



Moynihan expressed his joy to his archbishop at the answer from the prioress:

I look upon myself as the most fortunate man that ever came to America, and, of course, under God. The sisters of Mercy it is impossible to get. To be candid, I am not sorry, because they are not so educated as the nuns I am getting, their primary object is the visitation of the poor and sick and education is only secondary with them, so that I was almost praying that I may not get them. The nuns who are to accompany me are of the Order of St. Dominic, tip top educators, can teach French, music, etc.... I do not expect to be in New Orleans before the 1st of November. I would not think of taking those ladies there before then. It will be a rich scene to witness me sweeping the Catholic girls out of the

corporation schools.[\[9\]](#)

The jubilant priest further said he apprised the sisters of the comparative privations which they would likely undergo, but that New Orleans was a field ripe for harvest. He planned to have his cottage next to the church prepared for the sisters. It was obvious that he could not prepare them for the events that would unfold in the United States at this crucial time.

The sisters, accompanied by their pastor, left Ireland in October 1860 and docked on November 5. Within a month of their arrival they were teaching 200 girls at St. John the Baptist School. The Christian Brothers taught the boys. Their housing on Dryades Street, however, was not yet ready for occupancy. The ever-gracious and hospitable Ursulines extended hospitality to the Dominicans until their house could be furnished.

Within two weeks, the sisters began living in their still scantily furnished four-room cottage; it became their first American monastery. The oratory and community room were combined; the other rooms served as refectory and kitchen with sleeping quarters in a poorly ventilated attic that could be reached by ladder. The beds were of wood with corn shock mattresses. Wooden boxes once used for soap and starch constituted their only furnishings.[\[10\]](#)

At the time the sisters arrived, troubling events developed rapidly. First they learned that Archbishop Antoine Blanc, who had so enthusiastically authorized their coming, had died a few months earlier and a new archbishop had not yet been named. In December, South Carolina seceded from the Union and in the following month Louisiana followed suit. By February 1861, the Confederate States of America, which Louisiana joined, was formed. "The whole nation was in turmoil and the South seethed with discontent and with a determination to protect, even with the force of arms, what they claimed were states' rights."[\[11\]](#)

Despite the uncertain conditions of the time, the sisters decided to open a select academy in 1861. St. Mary's Dominican Academy, legally known as the New Orleans Female Dominican Academy, prospered from its inception. Needless to say, the sisters enjoyed having a fine academy where they could continue their tradition of excellence in education, but they were also

able to move into a new brick dwelling recently completed by the pastor and connected to the new academy. The school was placed under the direction of Sister Mary Magdalen O'Farrell.

Mother Mary John and her subprioress frequently consulted Father Moynihan about school affairs. These meetings at the convent resulted in some unpleasantness among the sisters. Sister Ursula O'Reilly seemed to head the malcontents. For example, it was she who wrote to the new archbishop, Jean Marie Odin, complaining of the frequent visits that Father Moynihan made to the convent. Mary John's letter to the archbishop sheds light on the situation:

I hope I have not left you under a wrong impression with regard to the matters about which you spoke last evening. I consider it would be very unjust on my part not to inform Your Grace that as far as mention was made of frequent visits. Father Moynihan is in no way to blame as it was by my invitations that he came. From the very commencement he was most exact not in the least to interfere with our duties or rule and constantly insisted on us never being absent or late at any duty on his account. As we were all strangers here Father Moynihan through every kindness came to look after different matters and continually having to heart our comfort and happiness he left no part of the cottage or ground adjoining which we considered to require alteration or improvement undone. Consequently this more or less caused these visits. Again when forming the plan for the New Convent and all the time that it was building a visit from him once a week or month would not have been sufficient To speak candidly, My Lord were I to judge from Sister Mary Ursula's discontented manner and haughty demeanor I could scarcely suppose that in making these complaints she was activated by any other motive than a mere opener or plan to leave this. From what I can conclude by her remarks she considers she was in a manner deceived in joining the Community at Cabra.[\[12\]](#)

In concluding that letter, Mother Mary John submitted to Odin her resignation from the position of prioress as well as that of her subprioress. "I am convinced that the Sisters would be better pleased and would be more unified if others were placed in our Offices. We have considered this over and over again and come to the same conclusion . . . the Sisters have no confidence whatever in me."

Mary John was correct in one aspect of that letter and much mistaken in another. Ursula did return to Ireland and soon after left the convent for secular life. The archbishop did not accept the resignations indicated and Mary John continued to be elected prioress by "the same Sisters who she thought had no confidence whatever in her." In the next thirty-two years she served as prioress intermittently for a total of twenty-five years.

Federal ships in New Orleans harbor, 1862



But more serious troubles occupied the thoughts of the sisters and indeed all the people of New Orleans. The blockade by Union forces tightened in 1862 so that New Orleans faced dire hardship. The sisters chose not to leave, though invited by the Cabra monastery to return to Ireland. Instead they determined not to close their schools and deprive the students of their education. In fact, in 1863 these hardy pioneers decided to accept boarders in their academy and expand their facilities. When they could no longer accommodate the number of applicants, they looked for another site. One was available in nearby Greenville. The property of the Mace Academy was sold at auction and the sisters acquired it in 1864 for the sum of \$10,425. The following year all the boarding students were transferred to the suburban site and the school was named St. Mary's. Mary Joseph Kavanagh, the first native of New Orleans to enter the community, was appointed Mistress of Schools.

New Orleans never suffered shelling by the Union armies, but soldiers were a familiar sight as they camped under the trees at the site of the boarding school and occasionally ventured into the chapel to pray. The young southern women probably found it difficult to accept "the enemy" even in a place of worship.

The year 1865 brought an end to hostilities, but not to hardships. But with determination and renewed hope in the future, these nuns worked together to expand their Dominican mission of teaching.

NOTES

1. Cabra Annals, ms., 3, Cabra Dominican Archives, Copy in New Orleans Dominican Sisters Archives (NOSA).
2. Weavings, Celebrating Dominican Women, n.p., 1988, St Mary's New Orleans Archives (SMNO).
3. Manuscript by Therese Leckert, SMNO.
4. Weavings, p. 7.
5. Annals, Cabra Dominicans, 1814, 76, Copy in SMNO.
6. This change of jurisdiction and recitation of the office caused confusion later. Generally, cloistered nuns (Second Order) recited the Divine Office and had Dominican priests as their ecclesiastical superiors. Third Order (apostolic, active women religious) prayed the Little Office and were under the jurisdiction of the bishop of the diocese. See the scholarly work of Margaret Smith, O.P., from the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia, "The Great Schism of the West," unpublished ms., a research paper concerning the Irish Dominican Sisters and their affiliated congregations, 1988, Sydney, Australia.
7. Weavings, p. 15.
8. M. DeRicci Maher to My dear Sisters, Cabra, Apr., 1860, SMNO.
9. Moynihan to Blanc, Ireland, June 28, 1860, SMNO.
10. Mary DeRicci Albrecht, O.P, "Brief History of Dominican Sisters, Congregation of St. Mary New Orleans, LA.," ms., 1985, SMNO.
11. Roger Bauder, **The Catholic Church in Louisiana** (New Orleans, n.p., 1939) 411.
12. Mary John Flanagan to Jean Marie Odin, Dryades Street, New Orleans, Jan. 10, 1862, SMNO.