



RELIGIOUS
SISTERS
OF CHARITY
The love of Christ urges us on

A short synopsis of the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead

Part Two



Mary begins to focus on religious life

Mary began to think seriously of devoting her life full-time and as a religious to helping the poor in their homes but for the present she felt obliged to help her ailing mother in the management of the household. The Ursuline and Presentation Sisters, whose convents were nearby, were bound to enclosure. Even in the whole of Ireland at this period there was no convent that allowed its members to move outside the enclosure. When Mary discussed this with Cecilia Lynch, Cecilia informed her that she herself was joining the Poor Clares in Harold's Cross, Dublin.

An unexpected, life-changing meeting



Then on 30 November 1807, when Mary was 20 years of age, a providential meeting took place at the Ursuline convent in Cork. Mary met Anna Maria Ball of Dublin, a wealthy woman in her own right who was married to a rich Dublin merchant, John O'Brien. She had come to Cork for the religious profession of her sister, Cecilia. Accompanying her was another sister, Frances or Fanny, the future founder of the Loretto sisters. Mary Aikenhead found that she had met a kindred spirit in Anna Maria. Mary already knew from her friend, Cecilia Lynch that Anna Maria devoted a great deal of her time in Dublin to the care of the poor and afflicted. Before leaving Cork, Mrs. O'Brien invited Mary to spend some time with her in Dublin. The invitation was gladly accepted.

Mary visits Dublin for the first time

During the year following on Anna Maria O'Brien's invitation, Mary travelled to the capital and remained for a considerable time the guest of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien at their town residence, the lately-built Mountjoy Square. Here, Mary renewed acquaintance with the curate, Fr. Daniel Murray whom she had already met in Cork at the home of Cecilia Lynch and whom she knew as an ardent champion of the poor.

The journey from Cork to Dublin which, twenty years before took five or six days, had been shortened to a run of twenty-two hours by the newly-established mail-coach. People had begun to speak of the trip as if it were a mere afternoon ride. In 1808, the year of Mary's first trip to Dublin a new coach, lined with copper and advertised as bullet proof, was started between Dublin and Cork.



While in Dublin, Mary accompanied Mrs. O'Brien through back streets and lanes and up rickety stairs, bringing food for the body and comfort for the soul to the sick and poverty-stricken but she did not forget that the principal object of her visit to Dublin was to fulfil a promise made to Cecilia Lynch to visit her in the convent of St. Clare at Harold's Cross where she was a novice and to learn what was the spirit of that institute and what were the charitable works to which the community were devoted. However much Mary would have liked to join her friend Cecilia, she felt no attraction to the Order of the Franciscans.

Fr. Murray is now Mary's spiritual director

Mary now consulted Fr. Murray on her spiritual affairs, relying implicitly on his judgment. He agreed entirely with her view that she could not conscientiously take the step she desired as long as she was so much needed at home. She returned to Cork and cheerfully resumed her old routine, not the less firmly resolved to dedicate her life to the service of God in the poor and not the less hopeful that a way would be opened to her at the right moment.

The death of Mary's mother

Before long, an event occurred which brought sorrow into the home of the Aikenheads. Mary's mother became seriously ill and after three days of suffering died on 24 August, 1809. The family was broken-hearted. At the age of 22 Mary was now head of the family. She busied herself with the requirements of the will and with domestic requirements. Then in 1810 having ensured her siblings were well catered for, she availed of another invitation of Anna Maria O'Brien's to visit Dublin again.

A noteworthy event had taken place between Mary Aikenhead's first visit to Dublin and her second visit. Daniel Murray was now coadjutor bishop in the See of Dublin with right of succession, having been consecrated on the 30 November, 1809 by Archbishop Troy.

Bishop Murray mentally pinpoints Mary as a future founder

One day, while Mary and Mrs. O'Brien were visiting Sr. Ignatius Lynch at St. Clare's, Sister Ignatius told them that Dr. Murray intended founding a congregation of Sisters of Charity and that he had proposed to her to remain disengaged until the foundation should be made, "but" added Sr. Ignatius, "not feeling up to the responsibility of a new order, I preferred remaining where I am." "Oh, Cecilia!" exclaimed Mary, "why did you not wait?" Mrs. O'Brien, struck with the earnestness with which Mary said these words, reported the incident to Dr. Murray. About



this time Mary's spiritual director in Cork, Bishop Florence McCarthy was visiting Dublin and one day when both bishops were discussing the projected foundation, Mary who was present, turned to her own bishop exclaiming: "Oh, my lord, when will you bring Sisters of Charity to Cork?" These words had the effect of strengthening Dr. Murray in his already formed opinion that she herself was the chosen instrument whom God would employ to carry out the work and he asked Mrs. O'Brien to endeavour to procure Mary's consent. Mary's reply was that if an efficient superior and two or three members undertook the work, she would certainly think, that in joining them she was doing God's will.

Mary welcomes Anna Maria to Co. Cork

During the summer of 1810 while Mary was visiting her relatives, Dr. and Mrs Galway in Mallow, Mrs. O'Brien who had developed a cough that caused her friends considerable uneasiness, came to stay in Mallow for the benefit of the warm springs, Mallow at that time being a fashionable as well as a healthful resort. The spa waters, the balmy air, the picturesque Blackwater scenery and the pleasant company produced the desired effect and Anna Maria was able to say to her friends on her return to Dublin, "My cough is gone and I am quite myself again."

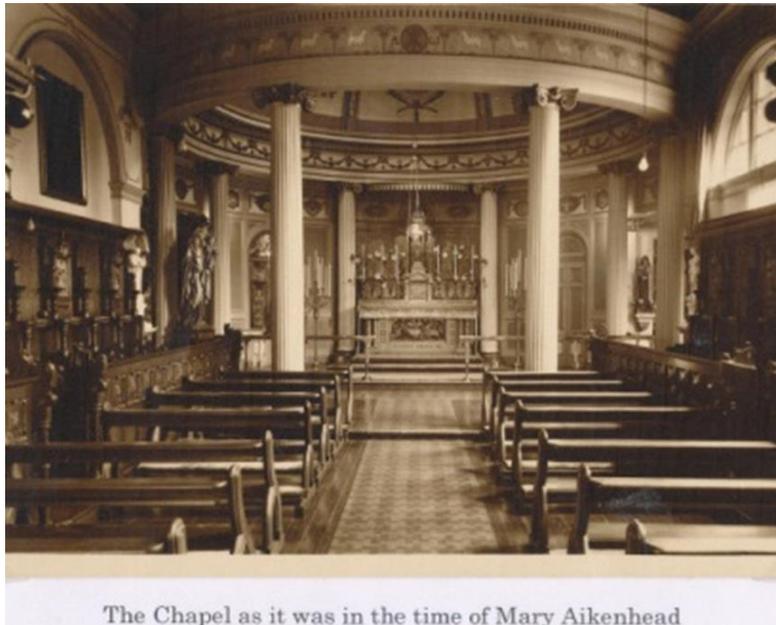
Bishop Murray "reveals" the future founder

In the summer of 1811, Anna Maria O'Brien wrote to say that Dr. Murray thought that he had at last found a suitable leader for the proposed group of Sisters. Would Mary please visit Dublin to discuss this with him? With mounting excitement Mary travelled up to Dublin. She stayed with her friend in Mountjoy Square. Sure enough, Dr. Murray called around for supper. In answer to her eager question about the new leader for the project, the bishop intimated that she herself was the chosen one. Mary was dumbfounded. At first she refused, greatly underestimating her own gifts and abilities. When Dr. Murray assured her it was God's will, that she be the instrument in leading the new enterprise, she gave her consent but besought the bishop to procure for her, the advantage of experiencing a regular noviceship in an institute where the duties resembled, in some degree, those proposed to be carried out in the new foundation.

Micklegate Bar, York

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Micklegate Bar, York, was thought to come nearer than any other to what was required. This Institute was founded by Mary Ward in 1609. The nuns made no vow of enclosure and went out to visit the sick. Their rule was based on that of the Jesuits founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Mary now busied herself making final arrangements of family affairs. On Trinity Sunday, 24 May, 1812 at the age of 25, she left her home in Rutland St., Cork and set out for Dublin where she met her companion Alicia Walsh, a lady about 14 years her senior. Archbishop Murray accompanied Mary and Alicia to York where they arrived on 6 June, 1812, the anniversary of the day Mary Aikenhead had been received into the Catholic Church. They were welcomed by Mother Elizabeth Coyney, the superior and Mother Austin Chalmers, the novice mistress, both of whom were to have a significant influence on the spirituality of the future Sisters of Charity.



The Chapel as it was in the time of Mary Aikenhead

The York Novitiate

Mary and Alicia would have had as companions in the Novitiate for different lengths of time the following Sisters:

Novice's name	Rel. name	Entered	Professed
Rosetta O'Reilly (Dublin)	M. Gonzaga	x-x-1810	29-09-1812
Anna Maria Hevey (Dublin)	M. Bernard	15-11-1810	22-02-1813
Sophia Hines (Ireland)	F. Borgia	x-7-1811	09-12-1813
Mary Aikenhead (Cork)	M. Augustine	6-6-1812	01-09-1815
Alicia Walsh (Ireland)	M. Catherine	6-6-1812	01-09-1815
Jane Fitzgerald (Ireland)	J. Xaveria	x-9-1813	02-07-1816
Frances Ball (Dublin)	M. Teresa	8-9-1814	09-09-1816

Not only did Mary and her companion have the task of preparing themselves for religious life but they had the added one of trying to select a rule of life that would best suit their future congregation. They never assumed the religious habit of the IBVM but wore the plain black gown, cap and veil of the postulant. However, with permission, they took the religious names of, respectively, Sr. Mary Augustine (Austin) and Sr. Mary Catherine.

Mary and Catherine began to learn the principles of Ignatian spirituality. They studied the scriptures and the theology of the vowed life and took part in all the duties, without exception

assigned to the novices. Mary copied spiritual papers and translated books which seemed likely to aid her in her future station. They studied the rules and constitutions of the Congregation founded by St. Vincent de Paul. They looked at the Visitation rule of St. Francis de Sales but Mary's appreciation of the York rule daily increased from recognizing the spiritual advantages its practice brought to her own soul. Moreover, she saw nothing in the rule she was following that could clash with the exterior duties of charity, which she had in view for the new institute. During all this time Mary was in contact with Dr. Murray by letter and he with her through letters and actual visits. He agreed with Mary and Catherine that the York rule was the one most suited to the projected foundation.

When the year's novitiate was drawing to a close, Mary and Catherine besought Dr. Murray to grant them another twelve months' probation, to which he agreed. At his request Mother Coyney kindly allowed Mary make a copy of the rule and also of the constitutions of the York institute. Towards the end of the second year, Mary felt more than ever convinced, that she was not ready for the work before her. To her, it seemed useless to entreat another extension so she had recourse to silent prayer. We will see how her prayers were answered.

Dr. Murray had made known to Mary and Catherine that he intended taking them to Paris where they would stay with the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul for a few months, observing their work among the poor. Now, because of the political unrest in Europe in 1814, the year that heralded the last stand of Napoleon, their visit to France was ruled out. At the same time Dr. Murray was summoned to Rome to help in the Veto negotiations and Mother Coyney offered to keep the Irish Sisters in York until Dr. Murray should return. Mary must have quietly rejoiced that her prayers were answered.

The 'Veto Question'

The 'Veto Question' involved the Vatican, the British Government and the Irish people. It proved to be a time-consuming task seeking to ensure that the British government did not succeed in obtaining from Rome a veto i.e. the right to refuse to sanction the appointment in Ireland of any proposed Catholic bishop that the British felt was politically incorrect. The Holy Father, Pius VII had felt under an obligation to allow England the Veto because England had helped him return to the Vatican from exile.

North William Street convent

On his return from Rome to Dublin in February 1815 the bishop set about enlarging the house and adding a chapel to the establishment in North William Street that he had accepted from the Trinitarian Orphan Society. It had been offered to the Sisters of Charity on condition they cared for the fourteen orphans therein.

Return from York

Leaving Dublin on 13 August Dr. Murray arrived in York on the 18 August to bring home after almost three years and three months Sisters Mary Augustine and Mary Catherine. They left York that very day and on 22 August 1815 with a favourable wind, they sailed into Dublin bay. On the following day the Irish bishops requested Dr. Murray return immediately to Rome to make known to the Sovereign Pontiff that neither they nor the people of Ireland would ever accept the Veto in exchange for Catholic Emancipation.

Profession

Dr. Murray desired the Sisters to prepare at once by a retreat of three days for their first profession of vows, which then took place on 1 September. On that day Dr. Murray nominated Sr. Mary Augustine Aikenhead, Superior-General and Sr. Mary Catherine Walsh, Mistress of Novices. On 3 September he received the first postulant, Catherine Lynch of Drogheda and on the 7th he departed for Rome having placed the Sisters under the special care of Fr. Kenny, S.J. During Dr. Murray's absence the community in North William St. increased by four or five new members.



Rescript of Pius V11

Dr. Murray returned from Rome on 23 March 1816 bringing with him the Rescript of Pope Pius VII authorising the establishment of a congregation of Sisters following the rule of the Convent of York with the addition of a fourth vow of Service of the Poor. On 10 September, 1816, Mary and Catherine began the visitation of the poor in their homes and for the first time in Ireland religious were seen engaged in this work outside their convents. On that same day in Cork Mary's brother, St. John died aged about nineteen years.

'Work increasing, hands lessening'

In 1818 Sr. Mary Teresa Lynch, the first who had entered the new convent, died three months after her profession. A few months later, Sr. Mary Magdalen Chamberlain died. The work was increasing on every side while the hands were lessening. Rev. Mother met the emergency by doing the duty of several offices. She was Superior; she was Novice Mistress in place of Mother Catherine who wasn't suited to the work; she went on the sick mission and on her return would take up the duty of an ailing or absent sister; oftentimes she cooked for the community; she dealt with callers; she was in constant attendance on sick sisters; for a month previous to the death of Sr. Mary Teresa Lynch she sat up with her every night, allowing herself little or no rest during the day. At length the strain of over-work began to show

towards the end of the summer of 1818 and the doctor who was consulted expressed concern about her lungs and heart judging that complete rest and change of air were necessary for her recovery. When Dr. Murray added his voice to that of the doctor Mary agreed to rest. Anna Maria invited her to recuperate in her country home, Rahan Lodge in Co. Offaly.

Rest in Rahan Lodge

While in Rahan Mary met Fr. Robert St. Leger S.J., Rector of the nearby Jesuit College who agreed to take on for her, the task of writing constitutions based on the rule of St. Ignatius and of providing a detailed system for training the novices. After about two months Mary Aikenhead returned to North William Street strengthened in body and soul.



Mary's sisters

What about Mary's two sisters, Anne and Margaret? Margaret married a Dr. Hickson and lived in Killarney. She was to be widowed young and left with three children in 1836. She outlived Mary, dying in 1874. Anne entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity in 1822 and as Sr. Anne Ignatius came to Cork in 1826 as a member of that new community. Sadly, Anne was stricken with the dreaded typhus, was recalled to Dublin, developed consumption and died in Stanhope St. convent in 1828. She is buried in the crypt of the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin. She was thirty-eight years of age.

A second bout of illness

For the next twelve to thirteen years after her return from Rahan, Mary was extremely busy overseeing the fledgling congregation, devoted to the training of the novices and attending to the thousand and one tasks that the founding of new convents entailed and all without a holiday. Towards the end of 1830 it was apparent that her health was failing. A doctor was called in who made the alarming diagnosis that 'internal cancer' was the problem. His remedy was a series of physical exercises although Mary found it almost impossible to walk and he prescribed a course of dangerous drugs. The chemist who made up the prescriptions became alarmed and refused to 'poison Rev. Mother'. At Anna Maria's suggestion, Dr. Joseph O'Ferrall, a prominent Catholic doctor was called in. He discovered that Mary Aikenhead was suffering from inflammation of the spine which had been greatly aggravated by the severe treatment.