

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 betw

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 ld

Mother Mary John Flanagan

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.

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.