

PROFILE

ANN

HANLON

Sister Ann Hanlon was a woman of great desires and real accomplishments. She adjusted her dreams of doing great things for God to the gradual unfolding of His will for her in the ready-to-hand of necessity and circumstance. Her dreams were lofty ones of a life of strict observance and contemplation. Her reality was in the down-to-earth duties of someone of her direct and

morning." [5] Religious profession of vows followed the next year at Somerset with Sisters Clare Osmun and Catherine Beck witnessing her vows:

I make it fully appear to my satisfaction, that I made my profession in the above mentioned convent, according to the rule and Constitutions of the order of St. Dominick [sic], Sister Helen Whelan, Prioress of said convent, being legally constituted and authorized to receive my profession, Sister Frances Whelan, Mother of Novices and Rev. N. D. Young, Director of the Con., I so therefore, by virtue of these present and in testimony thereof, subscribed hereunto my name This 14 day of Sept. Feast of the Holy Cross A.D. 1842. Sister Ann Hanlon. [6]

Two years later, in 1844, the young community of St. Mary's at Somerset numbered seventeen professed sisters and four novices. On November 17 of the following year, Ann Hanlon was named subprioress of this community. Then, two years after, in 1847, she assumed the position of Mistress of Novices. [7] Membership remained stable; in 1850, St. Mary's counted seventeen professed sisters, five novices, and three postulants. [8] During her time as Mistress of Novices, Sister Ann was part of a spirited movement clearly initiated by the sisters to profess solemn vows as second order religious. Her signature is affixed on a historic letter addressed to His Holiness Pius IX, and accompanied by an affidavit dated July 4, 1848. [9] The sisters petitioned for dispensation from enclosure and permission to recite the office of the Blessed Virgin Mary instead of the Divine Office. In addition they asked the favor of making the solemn profession as the Nuns of the Second Order of our Holy Father St. Dominic Their request was accompanied by a supporting letter addressed to Master General Jandel from Robert A. White, O.P., the Vicar Provincial. [10] No reply to the sisters' petition or to the Vicar's recommendation has been recorded. At any rate, in the episode we see Ann in solidarity with her sisters in Ohio and Kentucky, capable of passion for a cause, independent, yet deeply devoted to their vocation, the Order and the Church.

In 1851 during Sister Ann's residence at St. Mary's, the first canonical visitation of the Province of St. Joseph was conducted by Visitor General Robert Ws ained x 4n..7uM87 Tw -13 -1.15 Td[(sj(o has beencio6(onducted withexlem)8plMaryffirelty(andexactines CFatHolc shoole, At ppleasd t at

vicar general, Whelan wrote that ". . . there are twenty-four professed sisters and two novices. . . . They have quite a good school, and are all very faithful sisters. They are poor, but notwithstanding their poverty, they have by means of their school done a great deal.[\[13\]](#)

But to the Master General, Whelan wrote in a somewhat different vein. While showing genuine interest in the life of the sisters, he simply said they were all very good religious but added that the community has received members "mostly from such classes as are not competent to make teachers, and . . . there are more than the income of the establishment can support. I have, Whelan said,

taken upon myself to forbid the reception of novices in either of these two houses without my special permission, and this I did for the purpose of putting a stop to the reception of useless members and to ensure the reception of those who might be useful for the welfare of their academies.[\[14\]](#)

How Sister Ann reacted to the Master General's evaluation, we do not know. However, when Prioress in Nashville, she adopted for the community a constitution that made provision for lay Sisters.

Furthermore Ann resigned as prioress on November 10, 1856.[\[15\]](#) In view of the permission she would later petition, her personal integrity could have provoked the resignation. Perhaps, too, difficulties alluded to in her letter to Master General Jandel dated December 23, 1856, were pertinent. The letter in itself is a revelation of character.

Most Rev. Father in God,

I humbly solicit your paternal indulgence while I take the liberty to address yourself in person. I am indeed grateful for the encouragement you have so kindly given me to aspire to the Second branch of our Holy Order. Your objections to my going to the continent are reasonable, and not unexpected to me. I had considered all these things myself and viewed the very darkest side of the picture. It is not gratification I seek in desiring to enter an enclosed convent. Neither do I think perfection consists in enclosure. I am well aware I might be unhappy in an enclosed Convent. Enclosure is not my only motive in seeking admission into the Second Order. I have long and earnestly desired to be in a Monastery of strict observance where the Rule and constitutions are in full force. It is about a year since I resolved to use all the lawful means in my power to obtain admission into the Second Order. I have earnestly prayed to God to place me there where I could serve Him the best.[\[16\]](#)

In spite of its underlying personal trauma, the letter has a certain amusing quality because it seems to argue for something one knows one does not have. But an underlying honesty is felt. Ann makes her request quite humbly—at one point even pitifully, yet without relenting. What we see in this letter is fierce determination combined with a heart-rending steadfast zeal, both qualities which mark the actions of her later years. She does not lack persuasive powers. The winning quality of the letter, however, is that in it we see the human Ann Hanlon; here we come closest to viewing her soul in its bareness and striving. At the end, after her pleading exposition,

comes the line we sense she found hardest to write, "But if you do not think it proper to accede to my request this time, I will of course desist and resign myself to the decrees of Providence," even here adding a qualifier, "this time."

This last line is telling and the one which adds detail to Ann's character portrait. There is determination here which has not yet been sounded. The dream of a strict and contemplative life may have been a manifestation of a zeal not yet channeled by the real needs of her Provincial, the Master, or the Bishop. Apparently, she did "resign herself to the decrees of Providence." On May 9, 1857, Father Whelan wrote to Jandel as follows:

Again, a certain Sister asks to be permitted to go to Europe to join the Second Order. She is a very good Sister, but were her request granted, fifty others would wish to do the

indelibly, The sense of attachment to the land and natural sympathy for the underling may have enabled her to understand the struggles of the Southern people, but her realism and moral

military hospital with plank pavilion wards added.[\[24\]](#) Mother Ann Hanlon sent Sister Magdalen Clarke, Sister Alberta Rumpff and Sister Francis Conlon to supervise at the hospital and to nurse the soldiers there.[\[25\]](#) All the sisters who could be spared from St. Agnes nursed both Union and Confederate soldiers.[\[26\]](#)

Memphis surrendered on June 6, 1862. General William T. Sherman came to control the city on July 21, and with his soldiers "pitched his tents in Saint Agnes' yard just east of the convent."[\[27\]](#) Meanwhile the sisters continued their visits to the hospitals, ministering to the sick and suffering.[\[28\]](#)

1864, and Kelly had assumed administrative duties until late in 1865 when Bishop Feehan was appointed Bishop of Nashville. Financial accounts on the episcopal level were in major disarray.

In August 1860, the Dominican Sisters had come from Somerset to Nashville at the request of Bishop Whelan. Four sisters had made the foundation, naming it St. Cecilia's. Like their companions in Memphis, these women had witnessed the war at first hand, seen Union boats come up the Cumberland and from their windows saw the Union soldiers camped on the Academy lawn.^[37] Classes at St. Cecilia Academy continued during the occupation, but financially, the war had devastated the young academy.

It was chiefly for this reason that the Nashville sisters had petitioned the Bishop for Sister Ann Hanlon.^[38] To the community at St. Cecilia's, her calm and steady practicality and her direct manner of addressing situations were seen as a saving grace. On her arrival she began at once to assess finances and to stabilize the Academy. Within a year, major debts from the construction of the buildings were reduced.^[39] There remained, however, a mortgage on the Academy given by Bishop Whelan to John English of Zanesville, Ohio. By the following year, 1867, debts remained burdensome, and "in pursuance of a decree of the Chancery court, the St. Cecilia Academy was sold on the 27th of July, 1867." A postscript to the story read, "Rt. Rev. P. A. Feehan purchased it for \$20,300."^[40]

In a like manner, the Rev. J. M. D'Arco had been given drafts on the Academy by Bishop Whelan and "to meet this claim, a second decree of the Chancery Court authorized the sale of all the personal property of the sisters, on which . . . Bishop Whelan had a lien.^[41] Again Bishop Feehan purchased the items. The date of the auction was September 2, 1867, the first day of class for the fall session. Surprisingly, school began as scheduled. In November Mother Ann opened a novitiate. Meanwhile, and for the rest of the school year, she worked to pay off the debts.

By the summer of 1868, the small community of sisters in Nashville was fatigued and discouraged. The Academy's patrons, bankrupted by the war, could not pay the sisters for the education of their daughters and notes on the property could not be met. To add to their concern, Bishop Feehan informed them that he had invited Sisters of Mercy to staff his Cathedral school and he needed a place for the sisters to live. The Bishop told Mother Ann that she was released from any obligation to pay the debts—an impossible task—and that instead the sisters were free to return to Ohio.^[42]

Coincidentally it seems, at this time a letter arrived from the Dominican Fathers asking for sisters to teach in Washington, D.C.^[43] Assuming that St. Cecilia's would close, Sisters

days prayer," arising early and reciting the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. She believed that St. Cecilia was a legitimate foundation of the Order. She could not dissolve the community and leave debts for others to pay. Before the thirty days were complete, Bishop Feehan told her that the sisters could remain if the debt could be paid. They did remain and by 1880 the debt was paid in full.[\[47\]](#)

On July 10, 1869, Mother Ann was reappointed Prioress; then in 1872, she was reappointed for a third term. Debts were continually reduced. During this third term, 1872-1875, Tennessee was scourged by epidemics. In Nashville cholera took a heavy toll. Mother Ann asked the sisters for volunteers to nurse the sick. Contacting the newly organized Robertson Association, the sisters joined forces and worked with community leaders "as nurses during this sickly siege."[\[48\]](#)

Major events punctuated Mother Ann's administration in Nashville. But clearing the community's indebtedness remained Ann's continual concern. In 1873 she registered an appeal to the War Claims Committee of the United States

determined woman; she remained a religious whose "heart's long yearning" was for a "truly religious life." The first historian of St. Cecilia said that Mother Ann possessed a mind that was "flexible, broad, open, teachable."

Veronica Ray as secretary.

30. Council Minutes, ms., St. Agnes Society, May 16, 1864.
31. Council Minutes, Aug. 20, 1864. Cf. also **Memphis City Directory 1865-6**, 16 and 18.
32. Council Minutes, June 20, 1865.
33. Council Minutes, Aug. 12, 1865.
34. Council Minutes, Sep. 2, 1865.
35. Council Minutes, June 20, 1866.
36. Council Minutes, July 7, 1866.
37. Sr. Frances Walsh, O.P., "The Annals