



Dublin 1838

Sydney 1838

"....ministering angels' ora cause of trouble"

Australian Pilgrimage

Considering the Journey

In her book *The Singular Pilgrim*, Rosemary Mahoney makes the observation, ‘the self can certainly be transformed by a physical journey,’ and then goes on to ask, ‘but in what way would it be changed by a physical journey with spiritual intent?’

What if we undertook all of our travels this way? What if we didn’t save spiritual intent for pilgrimages to sacred sites but instead saw every journey as a chance to deepen our spirituality, and every place we travel to as sacred?

Thinking Outside the Church Jennifer Leigh Selig p57

The women we follow

Because the Sisters of Charity had not been instituted for foreign missions Mary Aikenhead could not appoint Sisters for this new venture. The only way she could fulfil her promise [to Polding] was by asking for volunteers.

To the Beckoning Shores Josephine Cannell rsc p14

The Sisters of Charity are some of the very best and more experienced members of the Institute. Mrs Cahill, the Superioress, has been in the Institute almost from its commencement in Ireland; and Mrs O'Brien was with Miss Bodenham in Paris. Mrs Aikenhead has made a great sacrifice, and made it nobly. So has Archbishop Murray by his counsel in the case.

William Ullathorne quoted in A Cause of Trouble M.M.K. Sullivan p24

The deeds of charity exercised by the community in Parramatta are, the instruction of the Female Prisoners at the Factory, and the children at the Poor School, also visiting the Hospital, and the sick poor in their dwellings.

De Lacy's Annals quoted in A Cause of Trouble M.M.K. Sullivan p54

Sr M. John Cahill

Most senior by age and by profession date; she entered in 1819.

Born Margaret Cahill 10 May 1793, her father was a prosperous glover and merchant.

Appointed Superior for the voyage to Australia by Aikenhead, but deposed by Dr Ullathorne.

She was a superb 'missioner', but had a tendency to worry about minutiae.

When she was Superior in Australia she refused government support in the form of a stipend as being against the Constitutions.

She was very distressed to learn that Polding's support of the Sisters and their works, supported out of Church funds, meant that they and their works had become the subject of the 'conversation of secular gentlemen':

'Since his Grace's return, I have heard constantly of a want of means, and felt that we were looked on by many as a Burden – of course now we are accustomed and reconciled to this feeling, but in commencement it was very painful to flesh and blood.'

According to Mary Aikenhead she was difficult to live with, though always willing to admit her faults.

In her letter volunteering for the Australian mission she admitted to 'deficiencies' and 'want of virtues'.

Cahill had far more experience of religious life than the other five Sisters, and Mary Aikenhead had been her novice mistress.

She was the natural choice for Superior when a Sydney convent was needed in 1840 and in Hobart in 1847.

She was uneasy in the role of Superior and Polding once wrote to persuade her not to resign.

The Sisters voted for O'Brien as Superior in 1840 rather than Cahill.

De Lacy claimed that Cahill played 'her part behind the scenes', influencing the superior who succeeded her.

Her letters give the impression of a somewhat stern character.

In a letter from April 1847, Williams describes Cahill as the Sisters 'best missioner'.

On 18 May 1847 Cahill wrote to Murray in Dublin referring to her decision to leave the Sydney Diocese for Hobart:

'As dear Rev. Mother Aikenhead appointed me Rectress leaving home, the two Sisters of Charity [the others having declared that they would become Benedictines] Mrs O'Brien and Mrs Williams, have

requested me to take them to Hobart Town in this capacity....I would not go from here in Dr Polding's absence, but the violence of the treatment to which we have been exposed for the last eighteen months had quite shattered two of the Three.'

In 1854 Polding in writing to Propaganda noted Cahill's 'surly obstinancy'.

Who was Sr M. John Cahill?

Sr M John Baptist De Lacy

Professed 25 September 1837.

She was born Alicia De Lacy on 1 July 1799 and came from a landed family which had fallen on leaner times.

De Lacy was accepted by Polding for Australia before she joined the Sisters of Charity. De Lacy entered 'expressly for the Australian mission'.

On 22 March 1835 Polding wrote to his cousin, his agent in England, Rev. Thomas Heptonstall, OSB, that 'Miss De Lacy is at Stanhope Street in probation to become a Sister of Charity for our District, describing how he was paying for her upkeep there.

Mary Aikenhead professed her despite her declaration in 1833, 'I never will admit any person to profess for a particular place'. De Lacy would only have been allowed to take vows if Mary Aikenhead did not see her as a permanent member of the Irish institute.

There is a wealth of material about De Lacy, but her character remains enigmatic and complex. Sr Xavier Williams' letters give the impression that De Lacy and Sr M Lawrence Cater caused trouble in the early days, by 'not being happy with superiors' and not having a 'quiet disposition'.

M De Sales O'Brien asking De Lacy not to be 'scandalised', when she used gilt edged paper suggests she tended to be judgemental and this is reinforced by later letters.

After she returned to Ireland, she wrote scathingly that 'young girls of humble class in life are bewitched by dress' and that the Bishop of Ossory did not know about the poor living in lanes near his house.

Her anxiety about children who fell into idleness suggests an energetic character and the thoughtfulness of what she did bears that out.

Her early depression and frustration at lack of success seemed to change into fulfilment at later results.

She provided a Christmas dinner for 16 children from the Factory who had made their first Communion which indicates a kind heart.

She commanded the respect of many Catholic laity, including John Hubert Plunkett, Solicitor General.

She initiated St Vincent's Hospital Sydney, the first hospital run by religious women in Australia.

Stories she related at convent recreation suggest she had charm and wit.

De Lacy had a stronger commitment to the Australian mission than to the establishment of the Irish Sisters of Charity in Australia, and while she had no prejudice against Mary Aikenhead, she saw the departure from Dublin as the final break with Ireland.

In her eyes the sisters came 'to Found in New South Wales a congregation similar to that from which they filiated'. This was a misunderstanding as under Church law a filiation is under the authority of the founding body, not a new congregation.

The Sisters in Sydney did not comprehend that a filiation made them subject to Ireland; Ireland did not see the Sydney group as a new foundation.

'To the very last she was a model of the faithful observance of Common Life; she cleaned her own shoes, knife and fork, made up her cell to her last illness. Immediately on being sent here, a very young Superior was appointed, and from the very first she ever showed her the greatest respect and obedience; indeed she was most exact in the practice of her rules, as regular as the youngest novice.

In her last illness, although 80 years of age, she used to get up for her breakfast, saying that it was a lazy thing to take one's breakfast in bed. She would then make her prayer, get her reading, retire to bed for the rest of the day. Her nightcap was her greatest trouble, and she enquired one day who invented them, adding that whoever did, 'had neither taste nor talent.'

From the Register of the Names of Sisters – Milltown Dublin

Though I felt leaving Sydney, yet my motives were conscientious and the merciful care of an Almighty Providence which guided me in my long and perilous voyage, proved that it was God's Holy Will that I should return to the Congregation to whom I had made my Holy Vows.

Her own words in a Letter to a Sister of Charity in Sydney 1875

She paved the way – she seldom enjoyed the full fruition of the works of charity initiated by her. Hers was the burden of making the rough smooth, and, if need be, removing the mountains of officialdom in order that no government law might prevent Christ's grace coming to his little ones – be they orphans, female convicts, condemned prisoners, children, the sick poor, destitute mothers or the Magdalene's at Carter's Barracks or back at Donnybrook. She could not supervise the growth of the two year old plant of St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney that she had so lovingly and thoroughly planted.

Jane Raymond, Sr Aloysius, said of De Lacy: 'It is said the voice of the people is the voice of God, and so she has it. The people would do anything for her both poor and rich.'

Who was Sr M John Baptist De Lacy?

Sr M Francis Xavier Williams

Born Elizabeth Williams on 12 July 1800.

Her father, twin brother and eldest brother were career soldiers.

Her twin died in India in 1834 and his widow eventually lived in Tasmania.

She arrived in Australia as a novice and even though she was the third oldest she was the most junior of the group.

The sea journey was difficult for her. Ullathorne, in writing to her after she writes to inform him of O'Brien's death, refers to her 1838 voyage and to his remembering her as 'a poor little sick thing.'

She is the first religious woman to take vows in Australia at Parramatta on 9 April 1839.

She appears from her letters as an open affectionate person, on good terms with her sisters as well as Fr. Gregory.

Her behaviour showed her to be loyal and generous.

In many senses she often played the role of mediator or peacemaker.

She maintained regular correspondence with her sister in Ireland and this revealed an often temperate and considered view of events.

Dr Ullathorne recalled her 'thin little figure' and 'loyal affectionate ways'.

She was emphatic that she 'loved and ever would love' her 'own rules and Constitutions' and of her own will 'would never change'.

By her own admission in her writings Williams 'dearly' loved and respected O'Brien.

Williams accompanies O'Brien and Cahill to Hobart and gives two reasons for her departure;

'...as all the other professed had expressed their desire to enter another Order, I thought I would only be in the way, and that they would be happier without me, that I loved and would ever love my own Rules and Constitutions and with my own will would never change.

And that S.M. John [Cahill] was elderly and her constitution not strong, that S.M. de Sales [O'Brien] was never strong, if anything happened how desolate the other would be.'

Bishop Robert Willson of Hobart initially judged her 'not so firm of mind' as Cahill and O'Brien.

Williams wrote to her sister in Ireland on 22 June 1847, and in reference to the Sisters in Sydney said, 'I have no doubt in name and all exterior things they will try to continue but they neither have nor want to have our spirit.'

Who was Sr M Francis Xavier Williams?

Sr M Francis De Sales O'Brien

She was born Catherine O'Brien on 1 June 1809.

She was professed on 29 August 1834. Her four sisters died before she entered.

She was educated at the Sacred Heart Convent, Bordeaux.

She was 'charming and well bred'.

Her father was a very wealthy landowner and listed among the gentry of both Co. Cork and Co. Limerick. Her wider family was very well connected both in the Catholic Church and in broader society.

Mary Aikenhead was too ill to attend O'Brien's profession. When O'Brien visited her after the ceremony, she found Polding sitting beside the sick bed. After introductions and congratulations and a blessing from the Bishop elect, Mary Aikenhead said 'Francis de Sales, my heart, will you consent to go to Sydney with His Lordship?' Her reply, brief and characteristic, was, "I am ready Reverend Mother, to go wherever you send me."

O'Brien was appointed superior by Dr Ullathorne though younger than Cahill and De Lacy.

She was elected Head Superior by her companions at Parramatta in January 1840, and again in 1845.

She dismissed a novice without consulting Polding which precipitated him suspending her for a time. Under her leadership, on 22 – 23 August, 1845 Polding made a visitation (or inspection) of the Sisters of Charity.

She was selected by Mary Aikenhead in 1833 as one of three to train as a nurse in Paris, which indicated her qualities.

Williams noticed her tendency to let Cahill make her anxious about small things which would have been better disregarded.

Strongly influenced by Sr M Ignatius Bodenham, and therefore not fully committed to the ideals of the foundress.

Sr M Ignatius worked to undermine Mary Aikenhead's concentration on the sick poor, seeing this ministry as unsuitable for intelligent women.

Bodenham was the assistant directress (1830 - 1833) and then directress in the novitiate (1843 – 1835) and was very popular with the novices. When she was dismissed from the Institute on 2 June 1837, thirteen of the twenty two novices and two young sisters left the Institute.

Bodenham was described by Archbishop Murray as 'restless, insincere, and a past-master in the art of petty intrigue'.

She came from an aristocratic family and was a pious writer.

Sr Ignatius Bodenham's personal charm, kindly manner and facility in talking of spiritual things won supporters including Fr. Kenny SJ friend of Archbishop Murray and adviser to Mary Aikenhead.

After O'Brien and her sister lost their father her mother had an accident which made her incapable of caring for them, so they went into the guardianship of Lord Clifford, a relative of Bodenham.

When Bodenham went to England to recover from a chest complaint – she suffered habitually from spasmodic asthma – in 1832, O'Brien a 'novice in delicate health' was her companion for about eight months at Clifford's house.

Bodenham was also selected to study nursing in Paris, although she like O'Brien never believed it possible that Mary Aikenhead 'would establish a hospital, so they contented themselves with an occasional walk through the wards [of the Hopital de la Pitie] whenever anything of interest was to be seen there'.

It is likely O'Brien felt some resentment against Mary Aikenhead when Bodenham was sent away.

In 1854, Polding in writing to Propaganda noted O'Brien's 'capricious imagination'.

Who was Sr M Francis Xavier Williams?

Sr M Lawrence Cater/Magdalen Chantal Cater

Cater was the only Englishwoman in the group and was born Julia Cater on 28 June 1811.

She was professed on 23 January 1833.

She had aristocratic connections but was personally poor. The only available description of Cater's appearance is from a past pupil, who recalled a stately English lady with a pockmarked face.

Dr Ullathorne had disapproved of Cater's conduct on the Francis Spaight, though acknowledging her talents. Dr Ullathorne characterised her on the journey to Australia as 'more clever and witty than she was altogether wise, though a woman of very good education'.

His criticism of her conduct may have led her to change her religious name to 'Chantal Magdalen' when in Australia.

She was restless, and Williams described both Cater and De Lacy as 'not being happy with superiors'.

Cater wrote to assure Mary Aikenhead that the sisters in Australia were 'devoted to the Institute, and Mrs O'Brien [Sr M De Sales], in particular to you'.

She was strongly influenced by Sr M Ignatius Bodenham, and therefore not fully committed to the ideals of the foundress.

Cater was admitted to the Sisters of Charity on the fund of Bodenham, and she was upset that when Bodenham 'quitted' the Sisters of Charity, she was left 'an entire burden' on the congregation.

Mary Aikenhead reminded O'Brien of '..... the reluctance with which I yielded to your urgent desire of our appointing Sr M. Lawrence Cater to accompany you to Australia, as well as the cautions which seemed to me necessary to give you, and Sr M. John, as to her character and training'.

Mary Aikenhead also warned Polding that she was unsuited to responsibility. Despite this, Polding made her 'admonitress general' (like a second conscience for the head superior) in 1840, and permitted her to act as novice mistress while O'Brien was away convalescing, and to function as Head of the Parramatta Orphan School.

She was shocked to learn on her return to Ireland that Polding had implied she was insane. On 1 October 1844 Polding wrote to Murray to describe how Cater was for him '....a subject of great uneasiness by reason of the unstable disposition she has manifested'.

Polding did however treat Cater with great consideration: '[He] endeavoured to soothe her mind and to point out to her the extreme probability that such a step [i.e. returning to [Ireland]] would be productive of spiritual good. For some weeks she may be tranquil then uneasiness recurs'.

While the rescript of 1842 had never been promulgated in Australia, Polding believed that Cater still belonged to the Irish Sisters, but in fact the rescript had been promulgated in Ireland, a situation that the Australian sisters maintain they were unaware of until its promulgation in Australia in 1846. It was Gregory who promulgated the 1842 rescript in 1846.

While he was overseas in 1846 Polding appointed his Vicar General, Abbott Gregory in charge of the diocese. Cater had promised him that she would not leave Australia until his return.

Polding had judged that 'her uneasiness proceeds from infirmity of constitution, and that no change of place will procure a radical cure'.

O'Brien wrote to Mary Aikenhead informing her that Cater did not fit into the Australian scene, and was to return home.

Mary Aikenhead's reply in August 1845 was indignant to say the least. She pointed out that the way the sisters lived in Australia, deviating from the 'constant observances' of the Irish group, flouting the constitutions (about the probation before becoming formed sisters), and disobeying her instructions about Cater, made it impossible that Cater would fit back into the Irish institute.

O'Brien arranged with Gregory for Cater to return to Ireland with Caroline Chisholm as chaperone, leaving on the Dublin originally about 20 February, but delayed. In the interval, both O'Brien and Cater changed their minds, the excuse being that Chisholm's pregnancy made her an unsuitable companion for a religious.

On March 30 1846 Cater had written to the priest of Parramatta, Rev Nicholas Coffey asking him to get Gregory to cancel her departure plans. She said that she had seen Polding, 'a day or two previous to his departure he told me to turn from the thought [of leaving] as it was a strong temptation....I promised him I would not and on my knees so and made up my mind so to do and felt happy in so doing'.

Gregory responded to this request, 'that as it had seemed absolutely necessary for the peace of the Community only two or three days before Mrs Cater to be sent away, that as she herself had expressed her desire to leave, and many expenses had been made in consequence of that, he could not agree to her staying'.

After Cater left Sydney in 1846 and arrived in London, she contacted Mary Aikenhead, who after discussion with Murray gave 'a very concise but decided refusal to receive the unfortunate wanderer'.

One of Mary Aikenhead's advisors M.M Catherine Walsh supported Cater's return and Polding's wishes on the matter. Polding had arrived unexpectedly at Harold's Cross at 9.00am on 19 September and in very forthright terms expressed amazement that anyone as unstable as Cater had been allowed to go to Australia. It was an effort for Mary Aikenhead to show a 'respectful listening manner'.

Murray was staunch in his position that Cater should not be readmitted in Ireland and warned that both he and Mary Aikenhead would be 'well talked about' for this position, while the Australian sisters and their acts would be 'kept out of view'.

Cater arrived in Ireland to make a personal appeal to Mary Aikenhead to be allowed return, and she was granted leave to stay at a Charity convent, but she did not settle down. M.M. Elizabeth Knaresborough, her superior at Donnybrook, noted that she did not know about the separation brought about by the 1842 rescript.

There is evidence that Cater remained in contact with Australia as she mentions the Australian Sisters and their difficulties in a further letter to Mary Aikenhead of 5 August 1849. They in turn heard from Ullathorne that 'Poor M. Cater is now in England I understand, having left her house, where I know not.'

She entered the Benedictine Convent at Hammersmith for a brief period, but after leaving here she seems to disappear.

Who was Sr M Lawrence Cater/Magdalen Chantal Cater?

Help or Hindrance

“Dear Mrs Williams

The character of the Church in this Colony must indeed be very low in the estimation of some of its members, when even the conduct of its highest Official is considered such that even women deem it their duty to subject it to investigation. Truly this is a new Era in ecclesiastical discipline when those whom St Paul says may not open their mouths in the Church of God, fearlessly ascend the Tribunal of Justice, undertake an office involving responsibility from which Men of the highest standing in the Church distinguished by their piety and learning shrink with a God inspired dread, privately to sit in judgement upon the actions of one whom they are bound by vow to obey.”

Gregory's letter of 16 April 1847 to Williams quoted in M.M.K. Sullivan p111

Sr M Ignatius Bodenham

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Bishop John Bede Polding OSB (1794 – 1877)

Australia's first Catholic bishop.

Polding superseded Dr William Ullathorne OSB in 1834, who had represented Bishop William Morris OSB since 1832.

Ullathorne laid the organisational foundations of the Australian Catholic Church, but Polding won the people.

As each new load of convicts arrived, Polding had the Catholics brought to St Mary's for a week of religious instruction before they were assigned.

Ullathorne noted that Polding was 'idolised' by the Catholics whom he 'raised.....into a religious people'.

His missionary activities outside of Sydney were feats of endurance and a symbol of his pastoral dedication.

Ullathorne described Polding as 'the most wonderful missionary [he] ever knew'.

De Lacy describes Polding with reverence as; 'our venerated Bishop John Bede Polding, Founder and Ecclesiastical Superior of the Congregation of the Religious Sisters of Charity in New South Wales'.

There was evidence that Polding was not a good administrator, a shortcoming which was exacerbated by his frequent absences overseas.



Dr William Ullathorne OSB (1806 – 1889)



Ullathorne was companion to the Sisters and their spiritual director on the Francis Spaight voyage, and director again when they went to Parramatta.

His attitude to the Sisters origins is best summed up in the way in which he declared that there was 'something radically wrong in Mrs Aikenhead's management'. This has echoes of Eliza Bodenham.

His close association with the Sisters in their first years in Sydney helped to create misunderstanding between them and their superiors in Ireland.

Ullathorne visited Mary Aikenhead frequently to negotiate about the Australian mission and had provided her with money to equip the sisters.

After this he apparently believed that she had nothing more to do with them and he acted as if he were free to change their customs.

He segregated them on the Francis Spaight which demonstrated his lack of understanding that they were an order which was immersed in the ordinary world. His only experience of religious women was the enclosed Benedictine nuns who followed the spirituality of their male counterparts.

He challenged Cater's behaviour on board, but maintained the trust of the Sisters and had a happy relationship with them.

His most significant effect was the tampering and interference with the constitutions of the Sisters. This began on the Francis Spaight when he made O'Brien Superior instead of Cahill; who had been appointed by Mary Aikenhead. Technically none of the sisters bound for Australia were eligible for higher office since none belonged to the class of formed sister – attained after 8 years of profession.

Mary Aikenhead had made it clear that Polding was free to make his own choice of Superior upon the Sisters arrival in Australia.

The constitutions determined that Sisters would as an act of devotion renew their vows twice a year after a three day retreat. The four who had been professed in Ireland, Cahill, O'Brien, De Lacy and Cater made their renewal in the presence of Polding who then admitted Cahill, O'Brien and Cater to the degree of formed sisters.

It was unnecessary for Polding to breach the constitution this way, for it also allowed for the appointment of superiors if there were no formed sisters available. Mary Aikenhead believed that Superiors should be chosen for their competence and not years professed.

On 7 January 1839 Polding 'named Margaret Cahill Superior of the Congregation and for her Assistants, Sisters J Cater and Catherine O'Brien'. There was little other choice available despite Mary Aikenhead's lack of confidence in Cater's suitability for a position of authority.

It is significant that Cahill is named 'Superior of the Congregation' as this reinforces the belief of both clerics and Sisters that this was a new foundation.

Ullathorne was most likely responsible for this view that the Sisters constituted a new foundation, based on his Benedictine experience where new foundation usually became autonomous.

Ullathorne was the only one who had familiarity with the constitutions so he would have advised Polding that Cahill, O'Brien and Cater be formed.

The Irish Sisters also credited Ullathorne with setting aside many of Mother Aikenhead's arrangements during the voyage to Australia.

Ullathorne also decided he would accompany the Sisters on their walk from the Female factory to their home, until the Sisters objected that this was a breach of their constitution. He later apologised.

It is likely that Ullathorne was responsible for much of the advice which caused not only the breaches in the constitutions, but also further fostered the belief that the Australian Sisters were a separate new foundation, independent of Ireland.

Rev H. G. Gregory (1813-1877)

Gregory was a Benedictine Abbot, born at Cheltenham, England. He was educated by the Benedictines at Douai and Downside, and entered the order at Downside in 1833.

When John Bede Polding came to Sydney as its first Bishop in 1835, Gregory accompanied him and worked as a catechist until his ordination to the priesthood in 1837.

In 1838 he went for a year to Norfolk Island as assistant chaplain and showed great courage in quelling a mutiny there. Polding, who had already great confidence in him, took him to Europe in 1840.

After studying in Rome, he received a doctorate in divinity. They returned in February 1843, Polding bringing with him a rescript to set up a Benedictine monastery of which Gregory was made prior and later Abbot. Polding relied on Gregory's support in establishing the Catholic church in the colony on Benedictine lines, making the monastery the source of supply of missionaries and a centre of culture and scholarship.

Gregory was Vicar-General to Polding from 1844.

Though loyal to Polding in all his enterprises, and hard-working and self-sacrificing as a missionary, Gregory was not suited by temperament or training for positions of authority. Although he had had only two years of monastic life before coming to Australia, he found himself while only 30 in charge of a monastery.

Yet at this time his sister, who came to the colony as one of the first Benedictine nuns, wrote to friends in England, 'It is most gratifying to me to see how much my dear brother is beloved and respected, not only by the clergy and community, but by the majority of inhabitants, both protestant and catholic. He holds a most responsible place'.

From 1846 to 1848 he was in charge of the archdiocese while Polding was in Europe.

Do you think these significant figures in the early story of the Australian Sisters of Charity were ultimately a help or a hindrance? Why?

The Context and the Questions

“And always at the heart of the story – often unnoticed or ignored, put upon by episcopal power and clerical arrogance, victims of injustice and calumny, sometimes hungry and at times uncertain, yet faithful to the work in hand, true to themselves because true to their vows – the Sisters of Charity”

Edmund Campion in M.M.K. Sullivan p xvi

The Early Years of the New Foundation

From its earliest days the Australian foundation began to receive vocations.

On 12 February 1839, Bridget Mary Marum (1816 – 1853) niece of the bishop of Kilkenny and brother of Fr. Richard Marum who were both passengers on the Francis Spaight joined. She was later professed as Sr M. Augustine

On 4 October 1839, Mary Elizabeth Gibbons (1816 – 1853), joined. Her family had come from Kinsale, Co, Cork in 1834. She would be professed as Sr M. Ignatius.

Both of these were to be followed by their sisters.

On 11 January 1840, Margaret O'Brien (1816 – 1889) later Sr M. Joseph entered. She had arrived in Australia in March 1839 and had known Mary Aikenhead in Dublin and been partly educated in France. Her sister also entered.

On 11 October 1840, Elizabeth Fisher (1820 – 1844), Sr M. Teresa joined, having arrived in Australia in 1838 to teach in Catholic schools.

By the end of 1842 there were twelve Sisters of Charity in Australia. Their activities gravitated between Sydney and Parramatta.

After initially staying with the bishop at Woolloomooloo, from 18 January 1839 they went to a rented house at Parramatta to begin work at the Female Factory.

They were welcomed by the women but not always by the officials there. There was also anti Catholic sentiment amongst the local families to the Sisters conducting schools. Certain sections of the clergy also remained unsupportive and one, Fr. John Fitzpatrick, actively discouraged young women from considering entering the Sisters.

On 26 November 1839, Cahill and De Lacy went to live in a 'small cottage within 3 minutes' walk of the Orphan House' at Waverley to put the Catholic schools there in order. These efforts were an immediate success and according to De Lacy, 'In two months the Schools were perfectly arranged, and in a very short time, the greatest improvement was evident in the appearance, minds and manners of the children'.

On 1 May 1839, after firstly concentrating on the female convicts in the Female factory the Sisters at Parramatta opened a school. While this was also a success, a letter from Cahill to Ullathorne mentions that in the early stages of this endeavour the nuns' only company in the school at times consisted of goats.

On 18 April 1840 O'Brien, Cahill and De Lacy moved from the rented house to the new convent. This move had been organised by Cater.

Accompanied by Ullathorne, Cahill and De Lacy, - 'after three hours pleasant sail on board the Steamer arrived at the Episcopal Residence' on 26 October 1840 in order to open a mission in Sydney.

They commenced work at the Sydney General Hospital and every third day, at the Benevolent Asylum. They also undertook the task of introducing order into the 'different Catholic School rooms of Sydney'.

On 6 October 1841 De Lacy returned to Parramatta as Superior and Mistress of Novices, while the Head Superior took her place on the Sydney mission staying at the bishop's residence while he was overseas. O'Brien returned to Parramatta on 1 November 1841 to await the return of the bishop and to hope for an arrangement for a permanent mission in Sydney. Polding's return in 1843 with Christian Brothers who stayed at his residence made any return by the Sisters to this accommodation impossible.

On 17 May 1844 with De Lacy as Superior, Augustine Marum and Ignatius Gibbons moved into a small house at 2 Burdekin Terrace opposite Hyde Park which was convenient for the Sisters' visits to the sick, to Catholic schools in Sydney, and also to the jail at Darlinghurst which had come into operation on 7 June 1841.

After the departure of O'Brien, Cahill and Williams to Hobart in 1847, there were eight Sisters of charity left in Sydney under the leadership of De Lacy. As all eight had entered the order without dowries, they had been supported financially by Polding and were therefore very loyal to him.

De Lacy gathered her Sisters and suggested that she return to Ireland and the others could make their own decisions about their futures, either in another Order – or returning to their homes.

They all declared that they had entered the Sisters of Charity and were determined to remain as such.

The Archbishop arrived home on 22 March 1848 and appointed M. Ignatius Gibbons as Superior General. De Lacy was left as Superior at Burdekin Terrace.

The Female Factory at Parramatta closed in 1847 and the Archbishop ordered all the Sisters to Sydney.

St Mary's Convent was leased to tenants, and a larger place, Leary's House, was procured for the Sisters by the Hon. J.H. Plunkett.

Three Sisters, M. Ignatius Gibbons, the Superior General, Sr Teresa Walsh and Sr Augustine Marum, died that year during the influenza epidemic.

M. Scholastica Gibbons was appointed to replace her late sister.

Support for the work of the Sisters came from an Appeal Committee to help them on a firm and lasting foundation. In 1855 a group of representative citizens approached the Government for a grant of land on which to erect a proposed hospital with a Sister's residence attached.

Governor Fitzroy set aside for these purposes a strip of land at Darlinghurst which was fifty feet wide and four hundred and fifty feet long. Years later more acreage was added to it.

In their search for a permanent home, the Sisters were fortunate when Sir Charles Nicholson sought to dispose of part of his estate before visiting England. He approached the Sisters with an offer of 'Tarmons' at Potts Point for ten thousand pounds, and the Appeal Committee paid the five thousand

they had on hand with a guarantee for the balance. They purchased the property on 8 February 1856.

The Sisters of Charity moved into their residence on 5 March 1857.

On the 25 August 1857, the first recording of an outpatient saw the foundation of ST Vincent's Hospital. The services of a Protestant doctor, Dr Robertson were given gratis to the small hospital.

The first female inpatients were taken on 4 November 1857, to be followed by male inpatients on 5 April 1858.

In 1858 a private primary school, St Vincent's Day School was established in the same building as the Hospital under the guidance of Jane Raymond, who was Sr Aloysius.

New Foundation or a Continuing Congregation?

De Lacy clearly saw Polding as their founder and themselves as a new Institute. And yet there remained conflicting views in regard to this position.

One of Mary Aikenhead's closest associates, M Francis Magdalen MacCarthy was later to write that there had been 'no thought' of a separate congregation in Australia.

On the other hand a friend of De Lacy, Sr M. Camillus Sallinave wrote in the Irish annals that given the distance which existed between the foundation and the Irish Sisters, it was arranged that it should be a separate congregation.

This notion of a separate foundation prompted Cater to write to Murray requesting the remittance of the £330 which she believed the Bodenham family had provided for her to the 'Congregation to which I now belong as I understand we form a separate body not in any way connected with the one in Ireland'.

In fact the separation began almost immediately the journey to Sydney did, with Mary Aikenhead noting on 13 August 1838 that, 'I have by this post received a letter from Sister M. John (Cahill), she wrote from the Benedictine Convent, Hammersmith, near London, but not a very full or interesting letter, as she merely announces their safe arrival on Friday evening. I hope someone else will be allowed to take up the pen before they sail, as I am anxious to learn all about their proceedings'.

Correspondence between the Dublin mother house and the sisters in Australia is scanty. It is unusual that such a prolific letter writer as Mary Aikenhead should not have communicated often with the five who went to Australia. After all the constitution required regular correspondence between the head superior and the houses of the institute.

There is some evidence that frequent changes to accommodation may have resulted in the loss of correspondence although De Lacy noted in 1859, that she had not written to Mary Aikenhead since her arrival in Australia.

When Mary Aikenhead wrote to Polding on 29 May 1839, she had not yet received news of the sisters' safe arrival in December the previous year. There is mention in this letter of previous correspondence which seems to have been lost at sea.

As early as February 1839 Cahill, O'Brien and Cater write in regard to 'pecuniary matters', specifically requesting that their dowries be transferred to the new foundation. None of these letters were addressed to Mary Aikenhead, instead going to either family members, solicitors or in Cater's case to Archbishop Murray. These requests reflect the belief that the Sydney foundation was a new congregation with no ties to that of the Irish mother house.

To further reinforce this sense of separation on 19 December 1839 the five Australian sisters held an election to choose a Head Superior. According to the Sisters of Charity procedure, representatives of the various houses voted, but Sydney had only one or two houses, and therefore no need for a head Superior. This action was in disregard of the constitutions as well as no longer recognising Mary Aikenhead in the role of Head Superior for the foundation.

Williams' vows on 9 April 1839 had already recognised Polding as the ecclesiastical superior.

On 13 August 1839 Murray wrote to Polding and Cater, insisting that the Sisters still belonged to the parent institute, that Mary Aikenhead was still Head Superior, and he was their ecclesiastical superior.

This placed the Sisters in an untenable position. Having lived almost a year in an opposing belief, they now found themselves subject to two masters, one local and one in Ireland.

As the foundation developed in Australia, the question of the independence of the Institute became even more problematic.

On 18 October 1841, Brigid Marum's vows contain no mention of Polding as ecclesiastical superior. This could however be due to the fact that he was overseas at the time.

Polding returns in March 1843, and the three sisters who took vows that year all include him as ecclesiastical superior in their vows. Polding had obtained permission from Rome in 1842 to separate the Australian Sisters from Ireland, a fact he did not pass on to the Australian Sisters themselves.

Cahill and O'Brien were later to tell Propaganda that they did not know until 1846 that they had been separated from the Irish Institute.

It is possible that Polding believed that those professed in Australia belonged to the Australian mission, and not to the Irish institute. Canonically this position is ludicrous, since Sisters of Charity were professed for an Institute not a diocese. One Institute could not have two ecclesiastical superiors with jurisdiction over different individuals instead of a whole congregation.

This situation caused irreparable damage to the relationship with Ireland and a permanent division amongst the Sisters themselves, so that eventually only those who entered in Australia remained in Sydney.

The next crisis was the profession of Sr Teresa Walsh in 1846. Polding left Sydney on 16 February 1846 leaving Gregory, his Vicar-General, to administer the archdiocese. Gregory was insisting that like the Benedictine Sisters, the Charities held a chapter and voted in secret to admit to religious profession. O'Brien objected to this change to their constitution and advised Gregory she would write to Ireland to enquire if such a change was warranted.

In response Gregory promulgated the rescript of 1842 on 2 July 1846, despite the principle in Church law which said that a substitute maintains the status quo instead of taking initiatives.

The rescript effectively established the Australian Institute and placed the Sisters in the position they thought they were in when they arrived on 31 December 1838. However it was not a means of clarifying and liberating the Sisters, but rather a way of forcing them into submission.

Gregory then informed the Sisters who had come from Ireland, O'Brien and Cahill, that they had a month to decide if they would accept the rescript or return to Ireland. Those professed in Australia were automatically accepted into the new Institute, as was De Lacy who had been professed specifically for Australia.

A Question of Authority

It was the vision of Polding, and supported by Ullathorne that the religious structure of the new colonial diocese would be based on the Benedictine model of abbeys and convents. They were most familiar with enclosed religious who were under strict control of their Abbot/Abbess. On the establishment of a foundation, it became independent of its founding abbey and assumed its own status under the direction of its ecclesiastical superior, in this case the Abbot or Abbess.

Both Ullathorne and Polding had little understanding of the nature of the new Congregation and its purpose as an unenclosed order. In fact on their trip to Australia Ullathorne segregated the sisters from the other passengers which demonstrated his lack of understanding that they were an order which was immersed in the ordinary world. His only experience of religious women was the enclosed Benedictine nuns who followed the spirituality of their male counterparts.

Ullathorne's most significant effect was the tampering and interference with the constitutions of the Sisters. This began on the Francis Spaight when he made O'Brien superior instead of Cahill; who had been appointed by Mary Aikenhead. Technically none of the Sisters bound for Australia were eligible for higher office since none belonged to the class of formed Sister – attained after 8 years of profession.

Mary Aikenhead had made it clear that Polding was free to make his own choice of Superior upon the Sisters arrival in Australia.

The constitutions determined that Sisters would, as an act of devotion, renew their vows twice a year after a three day retreat. The four who had been professed in Ireland, Cahill, O'Brien, De Lacy and Cater made their renewal in the presence of Polding who then admitted Cahill, O'Brien and Cater to the degree of formed Sisters.

Many further examples of these efforts to insert their authority over the constitutions of the Sisters were in evidence, and generally these interventions led to disunity amongst the Sisters and a sense of disconnection with each other.

Following the promulgation of the rescript, O'Brien remained at Parramatta with Williams as her assistant, and De Lacy was Superior at the Sydney convent. Gregory was much welcomed at, and visited often the Sydney convent, a cause for concern to O'Brien who attempted to keep some supervision over it.

In February 1847 O'Brien dismissed Fr. Coffey as confessor to the community at Parramatta without informing Gregory. When she finally did inform him that she was in need of a new confessor, she wrote to Fr. Patrick Geoghegan asking him to come to the convent for confession. This directly usurped Gregory's power as head of the church.

Gregory informed the Sisters in Sydney of O'Brien's actions and on 16 March 1847 they wrote to him apologising for her conduct - 'That Mrs O'Brien being wanting in respect of her Ecclesiastical Superiors, and having evinced a Spirit of insubordination to the authority placed over her, had rendered herself unworthy of the office of Rectress which she at present holds – But more so of that of Mistress of Novices'.

On 20 March 1847 O'Brien interviewed a young novice, Mary Mullahy who had been received on 2 February that year. She was anxious to ensure that she was not inducing the novice to 'Profess in our Order when she felt called to another'. On 1 April Mullahy left the diocese of Sydney for Port Phillip.

On the same day O'Brien had also written to Mary Aikenhead requesting her consideration of the Sisters establishing a foundation in Hobart. This was contrary to the post rescript arrangements which had established the Australian Institute and 'released' Mary Aikenhead from any say in this matter.

On April 5 Gregory summoned Williams to come and see him the next day in Sydney. There she was persuaded to sign a second letter from the Sydney Sisters to him. This one claimed that because of:

'Mrs O'Brien's conduct towards Revd Mr Coffey and Miss Mullahy in dismissing her. Mrs O'Brien and Mrs Cahill withdrawing themselves without your Sanction in offering themselves to the Vicar General of Hobart Town for that mission, and opposing Ecclesiastical authority.... We now solicit you as our Ecclesiastical Superior to remove those persons from all office and responsibility'.

As a result on April 7, on Gregory's orders, Williams removed the novices from Parramatta to Sydney, despite his having no right to move it when the Institute had pontifical approval.

Dismayed by the actions of Gregory, and determined to maintain their constitutions, O'Brien, Cahill and Williams left Sydney for Hobart on 14 June 1847, arriving there 19 June. Polding returned to Sydney on 6 February 1848.

A Question of Money

Polding often appropriated funds intended for the Sisters support and placed them in a position of dependency upon the Church for their daily needs. This was a deeply distressing situation for Cahill. Misunderstanding of the Constitutions in regard to receiving money led Cahill to reject support in the form of a government stipend. She was further sure that as a 'new foundation', the funds which the Australian Sisters had contributed to the congregation on their profession would be transferred to them. This was not to prove the case, and Mary Aikenhead and Murray both wrote to Polding restating their expectation that the Sisters would be financially cared for;

'When I consented to give up the personal services of Individuals, who are so much wanted here, I was fully under the impression, that adequate support, would be provided, for them in the Colony, to which they were invited.'

Dependency on the good nature of the colonial Church, most distressed Cahill who felt that the Sisters were being viewed as a burden and a drain on the resources of an already struggling Church.

Attempts by wealthy Catholic families to ensure the financial security of the Sisters and their works were equally thwarted by the Church authorities of the time.

William Davis (c1765 – 1843) was an ex-convict who became a leading Catholic by the time of Ullathorne's arrival in September 1832. He promised to support both the Sisters of Charity and the Christian Brothers when they came to Australia.

He paid for the rent of the sisters' first house in Parramatta and then provided the bulk, if not all of the money to buy the convent there.

When he died on 17 August 1843 he left a house in Church Place, now Church Hill, Sydney to be kept in trust for Sisters of Charity, and £1,500 was invested for them, yielding an income of £100 a year. Polding however ordered the funds to be directed to the Procurator General of the Missions.

They were also supposed to benefit from the generous support of Mary Corcoran (1807 – 1875) a well to do Catholic. In 1845 she tried to make the Sisters independent by giving them the income of four cottages situated on the corner of Elizabeth and now Victoria Road Parramatta. In opposition to their benefactor’s wishes, the Sisters were not allowed to take possession.

Corcoran then had a deed drawn up by which she sold the cottages for a nominal fee of £20 to two priests. She tried to make the deed watertight ordaining that while she had sold the cottages to two priests, income was for Catherine O’Brien, Superioress of the Sisters of Charity at Parramatta. Again funds went to the diocese and Mary took the properties back in 1856, eventually leaving them, on her death, to her son.

For you, which of these questions was the most significant for the early Sisters?

Connecting with one of the five original Sisters

As you undertake this pilgrimage you are asked to connect with one of the first five founding Sisters and to see the places we visit and the events we recall through their eyes.

This pilgrimage is focused on understanding these five women and what lay behind their decisions, their reactions, their relationships and their commitment to the works they undertook.

It is important that we remember that while these women were indeed saintly, they themselves would perhaps reject the notion that they should be sanctified. They came to Australia because of a faithful commitment to a charism that was given to Mary Aikenhead, and in which they found resonance and purpose. They followed a hope that they could be the means for a better life for those most marginalised and ignored. They represented a new model of female engagement with, and action within, the Catholic Church.

They were women of their era certainly, but they were also women of faith; tenacious, confronting, argumentative and wilful in the pursuit of this contended mission.

As you consider these women, and contemplate which you will connect with, consider the following questions:

- What do you know about her background? How might this have influenced who she was as a Sister?
- What does she say or write about herself?
- What has been written or said about her by others - by Mary Aikenhead herself; by the Church authorities represented by Murray, Ullathorne, Polding and Gregory?
- What do the other Sisters say of her? How does she relate to the other four women with whom she lives and works?
- What can you learn from her actions, her decisions, her relationships with others, both familiar and close, and those in the broader context?
- How does she react to the context in which she finds herself, in particular what are her responses in regard to the independence question, to the authority issue, and to the question of financial support?
- What qualities do you think she possesses? If you had to describe her to someone else what would you say? What do you think might be her 'character faults', and her 'character strengths'?
- What things in the Australian foundation would cause her irritation and what would 'give her life'?
- Do you get a sense that some of the works of the foundation might be more suited to her personality and preferences than others?

Choose her and connect with her now. Name her

Why did you feel drawn to this early Sister?

What attributes and dispositions make her suited to this foundation?

What challenges do you think she might face and why?
