

The steps we take

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
let it go.

"In Blackwater Woods" Mary Oliver in American Primitive 1983

Arrival: Campbell's Cove 31 December 1838

When time came for disembarkment and the five Sisters waited at the gangway the sailors stood, cap in hand, and said, 'God bless you ladies,' as they were lowered, one by one by a suspension chair into a small boat and rowed to Campbell's Wharf to step onto Australian soil. There would have been many in the welcoming crowd who had never seen 'nuns in habits' and it would have been quite a spectacle. Bishop Polding, a number of priests, Judge Therry – a relative of O'Brien, the Hon. John Plunkett – the Attorney General, a crowd of Sydney citizens and the children of St Mary's school were all there to welcome the newcomers.

The cove contained 28 vessels on the morning of their arrival which would have created a scene of great confusion and activity for the Sisters as their first impression of their new home. The average summer temperature in Sydney at this time is around 25C (77F). The Sisters would have experienced sea sickness, cramped conditions, minimal conditions for hygiene and limited diets on their four and a half month sea journey.

The Sisters of Charity were taken by carriage to the Bishop's House in Woolloomooloo where dinner had been prepared for the travellers, and to which the captain was invited. On the following morning Solemn High Mass in St Mary's Cathedral was also a celebration of welcome to the band of missionaries, and the Sisters of Charity were honoured with a front seat.

We pause to reflect

As one of the newly arrived five Sisters, you are greeted with this scene at the wharf of a great crowd of well-wishers and spectators.

Who do you notice? What faces stand out for you? Where does your heart take you?

Sr M. John Cahill shares and speaks

The oldest of the Sisters by both age and profession. She was known as a 'superb missionary', but also somewhat of a worrier.

Listen as she speaks to us on arrival in this new and strange land, as her voice of experience and certainty confronts new realities and context.

What do each of us take from her, what of our own thoughts are reflected in her words and concerns?

We consider

Arriving in an unfamiliar place brings some trepidation; we stand on the threshold of the unknown, aware of the waiting challenges and uncertainties that we might face, conscious that we may have to surrender some control over our lives and ourselves....

And yet arriving also brings great opportunity.

We respond – take time silently to record your thoughts using these questions

As you begin to walk the same steps of these five women, what most disturbs you about arriving in a new place?

Who catches your attention in new situations?

What gifts do you bring to new arrivals, new opportunities, new challenges in your own life?

We pray together

Context: The Rocks and Sydney 1838.



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We pause to reflect

As we travel along the roads of colonial Sydney we notice the types of buildings and people who inhabit them.

What contrasts appear to you? To what is your eye drawn? What impression are you given of your new land? What is worrying you, or giving you pause to think?

Sr M John Baptist De Lacy shares and speaks

She entered the Sisters expressly for the Australian mission. She was convinced that this was a new foundation and not simply the establishment of the Irish Sisters of Charity in Australia.

Listen as she speaks to us about what lies ahead. What particular view does she have of this new land, what hopes does she hold for this foundation?

What do each of us take from her, what of our own thoughts are reflected in her responses and her interactions?

We consider

Often we want to be able to see into the future. We say, 'How will next year be for me? Where will I be in five or ten years from now?'

There are no answers to these questions. Mostly we have just enough light to see the next step: what we have to do in the coming hour or the following day. The art of living is to enjoy what we can see and not complain about what remains in the dark. When we are able to take the next step with the trust that we will have enough light for the step that follows, we can walk through life with joy and be surprised at how far we go. Let's rejoice in the little light we carry and not ask for the great beam that would take all shadows away.

Henri Nouwen, *Enough Light for the Next Step* in *Bread for the Journey*

We respond – take time silently to record your thoughts using these questions

You are five, five women, five distinctive women, the likes of who have never been seen before in the colony. You bring with you only your deep faith, your understanding of what must be achieved and your determination to live fully the mission that enlivens you. How will you use these gifts to bring to fruition your dreams in this strange land?

What aspects of your life in Dublin will now stand you in good stead, what will not be useful, and what new ways of being and doing will be necessary?

We pray together

Parramatta: Religious Practice – Cathedral and Convent



St Mary's Convent Parramatta

Given the level of society the Sisters came from, they were competent to manage money, as Aikenhead did in the Irish institute. Nevertheless, the only property Polding allowed them to own was the convent in Parramatta, and even then, they never held the deeds. In the same way, though the Benedictine nuns worked to pay off the debt on their home at Subiaco, and Polding assured them that it would go to them in his will, 'there proved to be no will' and 'the nuns did not get full title to the property'.

It is obvious that the Parramatta deed of conveyance of 'the first and second days of April in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and forty' was drawn up without the nuns there, since all three names on it are incorrect. The purchasers are named as 'Mary [not Catherine] O'Brien Catharine [not Margaret] Cahill and Mary [not Julia] Cater'. In 1841 Polding told Propaganda that the property was given to the sisters in perpetuity but, as will be seen, he later tried to take it back.

M.M.K O'Sullivan, *A Cause of Trouble?* Sydney 1995 p67

We pause to reflect

What is it like to be a Sister of Charity in this setting? You have left the security of an ordered and regulated daily life, for the uncertainty of being without a home, no financial independence and a challenging call to ministry.

Physically you are hot, dusty, mosquito bitten, lacking in rest and sleep, without transportation and familiar food. How does this impact on your view of your new life?

Sr M Lawrence Cater shares and speaks

The supposed 'troublemaker'. The 'rebel'. The strong minded Sister with a will of her own. Mary Aikenhead sent her reluctantly to the new foundation and was wary of her 'character and training'.

She organised the move into the Parramatta Convent and is appointed to oversee the Catholic Orphan School at Parramatta when it moves from Waverley.

In this time of establishment, uncertainty and instability, she is engaged in work which builds the ministries and provides some security.

Listen as she tells us of her trials as she works to find her place not only in the new land, but also amongst her companion sisters, and within the congregation.

What are her doubts, from where does she draw strength, to whom does she turn for solace and advice?

We consider

Though Christian charity sounds a very cold thing to people whose heads are full of sentimentality, and though it is quite distinct from affection, yet it leads to affection. The difference between a Christian and a worldly person is not that the worldly person has only affections or 'likings', and the Christian has only 'charity'. The worldly person treats certain people kindly because he or she 'likes' them; the Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds him or herself liking more and more people as they go on – including people they could not even have imagined liking at the beginning.

C. S. Lewis

We respond – take time silently to record your thoughts using these questions

How do you deal with being uncomfortable in any aspect of your life?

How do you manage being uncomfortable? What strategies do you employ to move yourself into a more comfortable space?

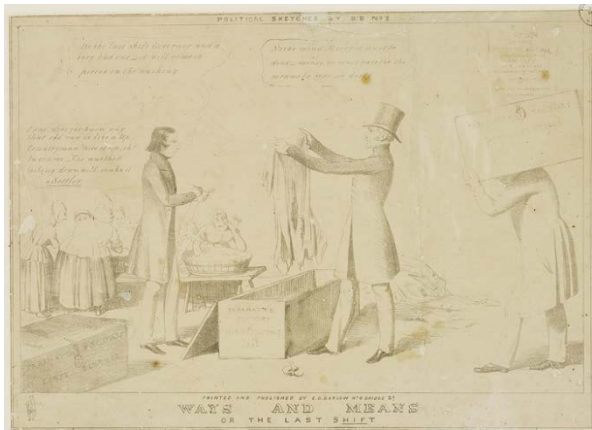
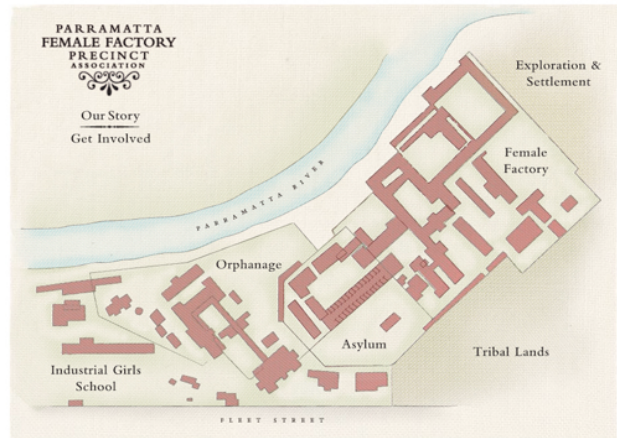
What can constraints or boundaries can you encounter in these situations?

We pray together

Apostolic Works: Parramatta and Sydney.



The Female Factory



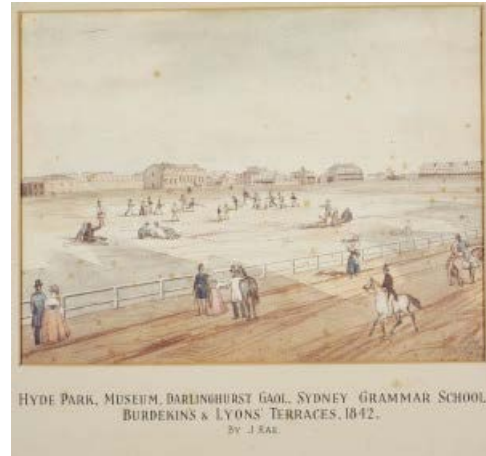
It is estimated one in five Australians are descendants of female convict factory workers. Yet little is known about these women. Society considered them "lazy, unskilled whores" with no morals. They brought with them over 180 trades. Just under half the Irish were literate and just over half the English were literate. They did spinning and weaving... they did rock breaking - part of the roads of Parramatta are made from the rocks that these women broke. They also did oakum picking, they did straw plaiting, they did sewing.



Polding's Residence Woolloomooloo



Orphanage at Waverley



When the work with the Female Factory was established, Cahill and De Lacy went on 26 November 1839 to live in 'a small cottage within three minutes' walk of the Orphan House' at Waverley to put the Catholic schools there in order. De Lacy's description of what they did can be seen as typical of their contact with other Catholic schools and is worth quoting in full:

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. They were 75 in number, divided into three Schools. The grown boys learned to read, write and cypher. The girls Work [presumably useful needlework, judging from other sources], Reading, writing and cyphering. The Infant children were taught Spelling and Reading, with the Exercises calculated to realize what the object of an Infant School is. A second mistress was engaged to teach the Girls and Infant children, who was for some time under the instruction of the SS[Sisters] until she acquired a knowledge of the [Sisters of Charity] system.

M.M.K O'Sullivan, *A Cause of Trouble?* Sydney 1995 p48-49

We pause to reflect

It is at Parramatta that the Sisters confront the basest treatment of their own gender. Further they find women who offend the very sensibilities of what they perceive it means to be a woman and a mother.

They serve women who have been abused and debased by not only the system they have endured, but by the men who have instituted and sustained it.

How difficult is it for them to bring the tender love and mercy of God to people who no longer feel his presence in their lives or their hearts?

Sr M Francis Xavier Williams shares and speaks

She is the first religious woman to be professed in Australia. She is a calming presence within the fledgling community and often plays the role of mediator amongst the members of the group. Although not physically strong she is totally committed to her vows and to the work of the sisters.

As the works begin to progress fractures open in the views and relationships of the five sisters. There is separation and angst, debate and division.

Listen as she tells us of her concerns at this time, of what she observes and how she copes. Who does she seek out to try to remedy the fractious nature of her community?

We consider

I believe that our constant search for security can never gain any peace of mind until we secure our own soul. And this I believe, above all, especially in times of greatest discouragement, that I must believe – that I must believe my fellow people – that I must believe in myself – that I must believe in God – if life is to have any meaning.

Margaret Chase Smith

Before anything is brought back into order, it is quite normal for it to be brought first into a kind of confusion, a virtual chaos. In this way, things that fit together badly are severed from each other; and when they have been severed, then the Lord arranges them in order.

Emanuel Swedenborg

We respond – take time silently to record your thoughts using these questions

Walk in the shoes of the Sister you have chosen. Picture her in the Female Factory. What is going through her mind? What personal qualities is she drawing on to help her process what she sees?

Picture yourself in the Female Factory? Where is your eye drawn? Who stands out to you?

What makes you move from observation to involvement in these situations?

We pray together

Consolidation and Growth: Sydney.



We pause to reflect

The *Benedictine Journal* entry for 19 July 1856 records:

St Vincent de Paul. Quite a gala day for the Sisters of Charity. Their new convent known by the name of 'St Vincent's' was blessed by His Grace today. Fr. Abbot Gregory was present on the occasion. His grace, after having celebrated Mass, was vested in cope and mitre. Our Fr. Subprior and our Master of Postulants, assisted him. They were vested in Dalmatics. The processional Cross was borne by one of the novices of the Sisters of Charity. The 'Veni Creator', the 'Miserere' &c &c, as prescribed, were sung during the Procession.

25 August was the date of the hospital's opening for out-patients. The first women in-patients, taken on 4 November 1857, used beds supplied mainly by the wives of prominent Catholics. The first male in-patients came 5 April 1858. The hospital depended on regular subscribers and there was an official collector, Mr Murphy, who received a commission for bringing in donations. Clergy of all denominations had the right to nominate patients in return for a subscription.

"The number of pupils averages 129 weekly. As the object of the Sisters of Charity is to meet the needs of that portion of the youthful community of our city who require a religious, solid and useful education, no pains are spared by the Sisters in charge of the school to impart such to them. The system includes Reading, Spelling, Dictation, Grammar, Geography, Maps, Writing, Arithmetic and

Needlework. The Christian Doctrine is the first morning lesson and the children receive religious instruction each day. That goal remains our commitment.”

Government Aid under the Denominational Schools Act of 1848 was sought in 1861. After State Inspectors visited the school and reported on the efficiency of the teachers and the number of pupils, S.M. Aloysius Raymond was appointed head teacher with a government salary.

The Inspector's report was still very encouraging in 1863 and larger schoolrooms were recommended. As a result a separate school building was erected at the back of the convent and the Infants School was built on the site of Sir Charles Nicholson's stables.

Brief extracts of St Vincent's College, Potts Point taken from the work of Sr Joan Jurd RSC, Sr Catherine O'Carrigan RSC and the Sisters of Charity Archives.

Sr M Francis De Sales O'Brien shares and speaks

‘I am ready Reverend Mother, to go wherever you send me’.

These are times of great change and disagreement; when authority is questioned when the way forward is not simple. The Sisters have come through times of great misunderstanding and conflict, some of it based on those with whom they live and work; some of it based on others who seek to impose their will on them.

And yet the ministries continue, the works are done, the people are served.

Listen as she explains her place in this part of the story, how she views those around her, what she believes to be the right action to pursue.

We consider

For me the experience of God means the experience of a very deep peace, I think we all crave mental stillness at this point. We need to drop the chatter, even transformational chatter. Sometimes, people ask me how to know what God is saying to them, as though His voice would have a certain tenor or something. But the voice of God is a small, still voice. We can only hear it when the mind is quiet.

Marianne Williamson

Trials, temptations, disappointments – all these are helps instead of hindrances, if one uses them rightly. They not only test the fibre of character but strengthen it. Every conquering temptation represents a new fund of moral energy. Every trial endured and weathered in the right spirit makes a soul nobler and stronger than it was before.

James Buckham

We respond – take time silently to record your thoughts using these questions

What happens when we confront times of discord, including the rupture of personal relationships with those we live and work with?

What does it take to maintain your personal integrity and commitment when those around seem to be wavering?

How can we move from our own perspective to understand the ‘other’?

We pray together