

The First Five Sisters

The Mission in Australia is Established



Artist: Hazel Cope

Clockwise from the top ...

Mother *Margaret* John Cahill

Sister *Julia* Lawrence Cater

Sister *Catherine* Francis de Sales O'Brien

Sister *Eliza* Francis Xavier Williams

Sister *Alicia* John Baptist De Lacy

The first women Religious to set foot on Australian soil.

Margaret Cahill, Mother Mary John Cahill

Dubliner Margaret Cahill was the first to volunteer for the Australian mission. She was also the oldest at 45.

The daughter of a successful glove maker, Cahill had entered the Congregation at 26, and pronounced her vows in 1821. Her religious name was John.



During her 19 years as a nun, she had already seen horrors, visiting prisoners and caring for the sick during a cholera epidemic in the early 1830s.

Appointed superior of the Sisters by Bishop Polding after arriving in Sydney, Mother John found that drought and the poverty of the church made the Sisters' circumstances difficult. In one letter she wrote, "*Every day seems Lent for all the Sisters*". They had very little to eat most days and some of the sisters died of malnutrition.

As the most senior of the group, Mother John would have considered herself as the guardian of Mary Aikenhead's spirit in this new land and so did her best to observe the Constitutions approved by Pope Benedict XVI in 1833.

After working at Parramatta Female Factory, Mother John and two other pioneering sisters moved on to Hobart. After arriving on the *Louisa* in June 1847, she began work at St Joseph's School, in the prison, in the hospital and the orphan school.

A dignified woman who stood erect, her piercing eyes looking out over her spectacles, she was known for her cheerfulness, melodic voice and steady flow of language. Not surprisingly given these qualities, the church was regularly packed when Mother John Cahill led religious instruction classes.

Mother John Cahill died in Hobart in 1864, aged 71. She is buried in the Cornelian Bay cemetery.

Born in Dublin.	10 May	1793
Entered the convent.	21 April	1819
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August	1838
Arrived in Australia (45 years of age).	31 December	1838
Left Sydney for Hobart on the " <i>Louisa</i> " with two other pioneer Sisters.	14 June	1847
First Superior of the Tasmanian Branch.	February	1849
Died in Hobart, aged 71. Buried at Cornelian Bay, Hobart.	13 April	1864

More about this woman of endurance and love:

Mother John Cahill was one of Mary Aikenhead's early novices, as such she was aligned to Mary Akenhead's vision to serve the needs of the poor and vulnerable. She worked courageously to care for the sick during the Irish cholera epidemic, she visited prisoners, was known as a great teacher and appointed as superior for the voyage to Australia.

Her personal qualities were many, recognised as a missionary and woman of integrity, others experienced her as cheerful, forgiving and dignified. Her ministry in Australia's speaks of a great loyalty to Mary Aikenhead and the call to serve in Australia.

Mother John Cahill as discerned through the research of Sr Moira O'Sullivan rsc:

"While a superb missioner, Cahill had a tendency to worry about minutiae, was difficult to live with, but always willing to admit her faults. If Aikenhead found Cahill 'difficult to live with' (as she wrote), it would not be easy having her as superior. As well, given the strong class consciousness of the Irish, socially it would be difficult for Sisters from upper class backgrounds to accept her authority. Cahill's character explains why there were conflicts between Ullathorne and her during the voyage out and then in Parramatta... In spite of her faults, Cahill had more experience in religious life than others and more direct experience of Akenhead's vision. When a second convent was needed in 1840 and another projected for Hobart in 1841 and 1847, Cahill was naturally chosen as superior each time. Evidently, she was uneasy in the role, and Polding wrote to persuade her not to resign. That Ullathorne replaced Cahill as superior on the voyage and that the Sisters voted O'Brien instead of her in January 1840 suggest that she was not an ideal leader. De Lacy was later to claim that Cahill played 'her part behind the scenes', influencing the younger superior who supplanted her... Cahill's letters give the impression of a somewhat unbending character, though Bishop Willson later praised her unstintingly."

A Cause of Trouble? Irish Nuns and English Clerics. p.16-17

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Alice De Lacy, Sr Mary John Baptist

Alicia De Lacy entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity in 1835 specifically with the colony of New South Wales in her sights, so Bishop Polding paid for her novitiate. De Lacy wanted to help society's downtrodden. She wanted to help the Irish, some in the Female Factory at Parramatta, who have fallen foul of the law, in many cases as a result of poverty and oppression. To do this in New Holland (now called Australia), she endured 136 days at sea.



Sr Mary Baptist's early involvements saw her visiting the Female Factory and the sick, organising, with Mother John, the Catholic Orphan School at Waverley in 1839-40, teaching religion and sewing in the Sydney Catholic schools, and giving attention to prisoners in Darlinghurst Gaol up to three times a week.

As one of the earliest trainee nurses at the first St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin, Sr Mary Baptist proved an invaluable asset in establishing health care services in Sydney. When three of the sisters moved to Hobart, and the fourth returned to Ireland, Sr Mary Baptist remained in Sydney, beginning the formal healthcare ministry of the Sisters of Charity in Australia with the establishment of St Vincent's Hospital on Woolloomooloo Heights in 1857.

An extremely hard worker, Sr Mary Baptist was also a proficient negotiator: she knew money was limited and being practical and open-minded, Sr Mary Baptist co-opted Protestant and Catholic supporters and staff, encouraging patients to practise their religion while in hospital. While this was in line with Mary Aikenhead's teachings that race, colour nor creed should not interfere with hospital care, one Catholic clergyman objected. Amid much controversy, Sr Baptist left Sydney in 1859 where she continued to minister for almost 20 years.

Sr Mary Baptist died in 1878, aged 79. De Lacy Place in Canberra was named in honour of her contribution to health care in Australia.

Born in Limerick.	1 July	1799
Entered the Sisters of Charity.	27 March	1835
Worked as a nurse at St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin.		1837
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August	1838
Arrived in Australia (39 years of age).	31 December	1838
Visited the Female Factory, Parramatta.		1839-1843
Catholic Orphan School Waverley.		1839
Family support influenza epidemic.		1844
Founded St Vincent's Hospital Sydney: first Sisters of Charity hospital in Australia.	25 August	1857
Returned to Ireland on the " <i>Star of the Sea</i> " <i>Received a warm welcome at the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity in Dublin.</i>	8 September	1859
Died in Dublin, aged 79. Buried at Donnybrook, Dublin.	12 December	1878

More about this woman of healing and courage:

Sr Mary John Baptist De Lacy was practical, organised, open-minded and extremely hard-working. She had the ability to see the big picture and develop a vision. She was known and well respected as a skilled manager and negotiator of finances. In addition, Sr Mary John Baptist De Lacy was known as a caring and compassionate nurse, who was well liked, affirming and embracing of others. Her practical outlook saw her lending a hand when needed.

Her personal qualities saw a great capacity to attract and support friends, though intolerant at times. Sr Mary John Baptist De Lacy was a prayerful and reflective Sister of Charity; much of the knowledge of the Sisters in the early years in the colony is gleaned from her writings.

Sr Mary John Baptist De Lacy as discerned through the research of Sr Moira O'Sullivan rsc:

“After meeting Polding and offering to go to Australia, De Lacy joined the Sisters of Charity to prepare. Polding paid for her training and took responsibility for her upkeep, as she did not bring a dowry. This was 800 pounds (a considerable sum in those days) that candidates for the Sisters of Charity brought to support them, so that any money received could be used to help the poor... De Lacy could not have become a Sister of Charity without Polding's patronage. That explains much that happened later...De Lacy was set apart from other pioneers not only because she stayed the longest in Sydney but also because she 'had entered specifically for the Australian Mission' ...Despite a wealth of material from and about de Lacy, her character remains as enigmatic and complex as Polding's. William's letters to her sister gave the impression that De Lacy and Cater caused trouble in the early days, 'not being happy with superiors; and not having a 'quiet disposition' ...At the same time De Lacy was a tireless worker. She won the respect of many Catholics, including John Hubert Plunkett, Solicitor General, who helped her take the courageous initiative of opening St Vincent's Hospital in 1857, the first run by religious women in Australia... Letters from Australia sent to her after her departure, and stories in the convent Annals, indicate her charm and wit.”

A Cause of Trouble? Irish Nuns and English Clerics. p.17-19

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Eliza Williams, Sister Francis Xavier

Diminutive, unassuming Sister Mary Xavier Williams was still a novice when she headed down-under in 1838: she had only entered the Sisters of Charity two years earlier, following her mother's death.

On 9 April 1839, Sr Mary Xavier Williams became the first woman professed on Australian soil. The ceremony took place at St Patrick's Church in Parramatta. This was a very special occasion, not only for the Sisters, but for the colony's burgeoning Catholic community, inspiring other young women to join. Sr Xavier believed that being a Sister of Charity brought with it the responsibility of caring for, and helping, others. She once said her work was to "bring hope" to people's lives: *"these people need some inspiration and that is why we have come"*. This tenacious little nun was always ready to help everyone she met. She ministered to the outcast convicts, visited the poor, the sick or grieving in their homes, taught children and adults, and proved a compassionate and loving mother-figure to the orphaned.

Sr Xavier joined Mother John Cahill and Sr de Sales O'Brien in furthering the Congregation's work in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). They visited the female penitentiary, an institution of far more misery than the Female Factory in Parramatta; they visited schools, and also the sick and poor in their homes and hospitals. Bishop Willson said the three pioneer Sisters in Tasmania did as much work as 15 sisters in Ireland.

Sr Xavier became Tasmania's first religious principal at St Joseph's Girls' School, in Macquarie Street and established St Joseph's orphanage in 1879, at the age of 79.

About 300 destitute women and children enjoyed a feast as part of her golden jubilee celebrations in 1889. A year later, Sr Xavier retired, having seen the Tasmanian and Sydney Congregations amalgamate. Sr Xavier died in 1892, aged 91. She is buried in the Cornelian Bay cemetery.



Born in Kilkenny but lived mainly in Dublin, Ireland.	12 July	1800
Commenced her Novitiate.	8 December	1836
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia	18 August	1838
Arrived at Sydney, Australia (38 years old). Seasick all the way.	31 December	1838
First woman to be professed on Australian soil.	9 April	1839
A member of the group of three to sail on the "Louisa" to ministry in Hobart.	14 June	1847
Loyalty to the Congregation's Constitutions was demonstrated.	June	1847
Established St Joseph's Orphanage, Hobart (aged 79)		1879
Celebrated her Golden Jubilee of Religious Profession, the first in Australia.	April	1889
The amalgamation with the Sisters of Charity in Sydney was approved. Williams initiated this move.		1890
Died in Hobart, 91 years & 9 months old. Buried at Cornelian Bay, Hobart.	8 April	1892

More about this woman of perseverance and love:

Sr Francis Xavier Williams' parents eloped as their mixed marriage was frowned upon by the society of the day. Her father was in the army, she was a twin to brother William, with two other brothers and a sister. Her sister Maria entered the Sisters of Charity. Eliza was taught at her aunts' school and entered the Sisters of Charity after her mother's death.

In Tasmania, Sr Francis Xavier Williams' compassionate and loving ways contributed positive influences and changes to the female population. She worked tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

Personally, she was valued for her common sense and wisdom, highlighted by her many letters to businesses in Tasmania. Her loyalty and affection, meant she was engaged with all peoples.

Sr Francis Xavier Williams as discerned through the research of Sr Moira O'Sullivan RSC:

“Elizabeth (Eliza) Williams and her twin brother, William were born 12 July, 1800. Her father, twin and eldest brother all had careers in the British Army... Her father died, becoming a Catholic as her was dying on the battlefield in 1812, his son William beside him. A small pension was granted his widow...Eliza stayed at home to care for her mother and younger brothers, allowing her sister Maria to become a Sister of Charity (Sr M Borgia). Eliza's letters to her provide details about early events in Australia...All this care giving meant Eliza was older when she entered religious life, and close to forty (38) when, as Sr M Xavier, she arrived in Sydney. In spite of being the third oldest, Williams was regarded as the most junior of the group, according to custom, because she had been a religious for the shortest time. A few months later she became the first woman to take religious vows in this country... Though William (her twin) died in Bombay in 1834, Xavier and Borgia both corresponded to his widow Jane. These personal letters show Williams to be an open, loving person, on good terms with her family, the Sisters and the clergy. Ullathorne later recalled her 'thin little figure' and 'loyal affectionate ways'. Events proved her loyal and generous. She was emphatic that she 'loved and would ever love' her 'own Rules and Constitutions' and of her own will 'would never change'. In spite of this apparent certainty, Bishop Robert Willson of Hobart initially judged her 'not so firm of mind' as Cahill and O'Brien. Nevertheless, she not only remained a Sister of Charity, but effected a reunion of the Sydney and Tasmanian congregations before her death in 1892. She had a talent for getting on with everyone.”

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Catherine Henrietta O'Brien, Sister Francis de Sales

Catherine was born into a well-to-do land-owning family on 2 June 1809 in Cork, Ireland. She was charming and well-bred and had been educated at the Sacred Heart Convent in France. She had a vast network of relations in Ireland and a cousin, Roger Therry, prominent in Catholic affairs in Australia.



As a young woman she suffered tragedy. Before she entered the convent, her father, Cornelius and four of her sisters had died. Her mother, a little after her husband's death, sustained head injuries in a fall from her carriage which impaired her reason and prevented her from managing her affairs. The two younger daughters then became wards of the Chancery and when Catherine, aged 18, returned from boarding school in France, she entered the Sisters of Charity. On hearing this, her guardian promptly removed her as he thought she was too young. Her desire to stand with the poor and suffering did not waiver and she returned three years later, taking vows in 1834.

Sr Mary Francis de Sales O'Brien (four years professed) volunteered to go to Australia to make a difference in people's lives. Apprehensive about what lay ahead, she was well prepared for the challenge: she was one of three sisters sent to Paris to study hospital administration ahead of St Vincent's Hospital's opening in Dublin. She was also recognised for her teaching skills and the English Government offered to pay a stipend for her to teach in the New South Wales colony.

After working in Parramatta, she came under pressure to adopt Benedictine ways but, with the support of Mother John Cahill and Sr Xavier Williams, she chose instead to relocate to Hobart in 1847 to continue working within the Sisters of Charity Constitutions and to continue helping the downtrodden women in the gaols.

Mother de Sales O'Brien died in Hobart in 1871 after a long and painful illness. She is buried in the Cornelian Bay cemetery.

Born in Cork.	2 June	1809
Commenced her Novitiate.	11 March	1831
Professed.	29 August	1834
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August	1838
Appointed-superior in place of Cahill on the voyage.		1838
Arrived in Australia (29 years of age).	31 December	1838
Elected superior of the Parramatta community.	19 December	1839
Set sail from Sydney for Hobart on the "Louisa" with two of the pioneer Sisters.	14 June	1847
Appointed Mistress of Novices and Assistant to M John Cahill.	February	1849
Died Hobart Town, aged 63. Professed 38 years.	6 November	1871

More about this woman of loyalty and compassion:

Sr Mary Francis de Sales O'Brien was from a wealthy family and lived at Castle Kilcor, with all the privilege that such an estate afforded. Her heiress status informed her expectations for herself and how she should be treated; she was educated in France and later as a Sisters of Charity, she was one of the three Sisters whom Mary Aikenhead sent to Paris to study hospital administration. Her noble heritage meant that it was difficult for her to accept the authority of Cahill, whose own family was from a humbler background. She was recognised as a skilled and dedicated teacher, bringing her charm and noble qualities to her work.

A beautiful woman, Sr Mary Francis de Sales O'Brien was experienced as delicate and sensitive, not able to with-stand pressure. At times she could be impulsive. On the voyage to Australia, she was made the Superior in place of Cahill.

Sr Mary Francis de Sales O'Brien *as discerned through the research of Sr Moira O'Sullivan rsc:*

“Sr M Ignatius Bodenham, when novice mistress, was particularly interested in Catherine O'Brien, the future Sr M. Francis de Sales...O'Brien was the only volunteer to be both well-born and personally wealthy, both of which gave her a certain status, even though she was the second youngest...During her first novitiate, her guardian, Lord Clifford, had made her leave until she matured, making her twenty-five when she professed in 1934...Being a favourite of Bodenham, O'Brien's second novitiate was unusual... from April 1833 to June 1834, O'Brien and Bodenham, according to Sallinave, their companion in Paris, spent their time visiting Irish exiles instead of learning hospital management... It is unclear how many of Bodenham's ideas (about the wastefulness of talented women demeaning themselves as nurses for the poor) were shared by O'Brien...”

Ullathorne overturned Akenhead's appointment and appointed O'Brien superior in place of Cahill. Even though Polding reversed that, he was soon to allow the Sisters to have O'Brien back in charge. Cahill, however, trained by Aikenhead, influenced her, so the two seemed to act in concert no matter who had the title of superior.”

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Julia Matilda Cater, Sr Mary Lawrence

(known as St Mary Magdalen Chantal in Australia)

Julia Cater was born on Friday 28 June 1811 in England into an upper-class family with strong connections with the clergy and Catholic community.

Cater entered the Congregation on Saturday 24 August 1830 and was received into the Novitiate a few months later. As a novice she received the habit and white veil, together with a new name, Sister Mary Lawrence. On Wednesday 23 January 1833 she made her Profession.



Cater was 27 years of age when she came to Australia. She was the youngest and the only English woman amongst the pioneer group. Recognising, like Dr Ullathorne, Cater's solid education, the British Government offered to pay her as a teacher in the colony. Dr Ullathorne, though admitting her to be witty, did not find her as prudent as he wished on the voyage. Mary Aikenhead also doubted that she was suitable for the mission.

Cater, like Cahill and O'Brien, wrote home in the early years to Ireland to try to reclaim her dowry (which she mistakenly believed existed) to alleviate the financial deprivation the Sisters suffered in Australia. The Sisters found it both embarrassing and distressing to deprive the mission in Australia of the small aid it received from overseas funding by accepting funds from the Church.

As well as visiting the Female Factory, Cater was given the position of head of the Catholic Orphan School at Parramatta, and she also instructed the novices for a short time. But trials of colonial life led to an ever-growing desire to abandon the mission.

Cater returned to Ireland in 1846, but left the Irish Congregation again a few years later, joining the Benedictine Oblates. She finally left religious life and took the position of governess in a French family.

Born in England.	26 November	1811
Entered the Congregation.	24 August	1830
Professed: visitation of the sick and poor.	23 January	1833
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August	1838
Arrived in Australia (27 years of age).	31 December	1838
Visited the Female Factory, Parramatta.		1839
Head of the Catholic Orphan School at Parramatta: admired for her organisation skills and success		
Assisted families during the influenza epidemic		1844
Returned to Ireland.		1846
Joined the Benedictine Oblates for a short time. Left religious life and took a position of governess in a French family.		
Date of death unknown.		

More about this woman of suffering and change:

Sr Mary Lawrence Cater was the only Englishwoman and the youngest of the five pioneer Sisters. She came to Australia with a solid education including artistic talents. She was restless from the beginning, though noted by Archbishop Polding for her admirable organisation of the Catholic Orphan School in Paramatta. Sr Mary Lawrence Cater was a discerning and prayerful woman, at times witty, though history may suggest, not always wise.

Sr Mary Lawrence Cater *as discerned through the research of Sr Moira O'Sullivan rsc:*

“Her religious training was completed under the direction of her cousin, Bodenham, whose ideals were not Akenhead’s. In spite of aristocratic connections, Cater was personally poor, unable to provide a dowry... Like O’Brien, Cater was educated mainly in France... She was restless and unhappy with superiors and the first to leave the Sydney mission in 1846, causing a backlash for the other four Sisters and those in Dublin...

Letters, however, as well as the events of her departure in 1846, support the judgement about Cater’s instability, though not insanity. That instability unsettled the Sydney foundation by prejudicing a powerful young English Benedictine, Rev Henry Gregory, against the Sisters’ two main authority figures, Cahill and O’Brien, and perhaps against the Sisters of Charity in general.”

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