

## **LAUNCH OF THE CORRESPONDENCE OF MOTHER VINCENT WHITTY**

**Baggot Street, Dublin, 13 April 2012.**

Good morning, and thank you for responding to the invitation from the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy to this event. I am sure Mother Vincent would be somewhat bemused to see so many Sisters of Mercy from around the globe, members of the Whitty family and friends of the Sisters of Mercy here in such numbers to honour her legacy. As not all of you would be familiar with Mother Vincent, I thought it would be good to speak briefly about her life before talking about the book and the significance of its contents.

On January 6 1839, Catherine McAuley wrote to her friend Frances Warde in Carlow:

*We are exactly as you left us, except that a new Sister was concluded for this day from Co Wexford. She comes in a week. .... She will not be 20 till next month. Very pleasing and musical.*

The young lady mentioned was Ellen Whitty. She was born on 1 March 1819, the fifth of the seven children of William and Johanna Whitty of Poldharrigge, Co Wexford. William was a farmer, but the rich lands beside the river Slayney were productive enough to enable him to send his children to private schools in Dublin. At Miss Finn's establishment in Hardwicke Place, as well as the three R's, Ellen received a good grounding in music, French and needlework and other subjects considered to be part of a well-rounded education for young ladies of the day. It is not recorded where or how Ellen became acquainted with the Sisters of Mercy. A Mercy foundation was not established in Wexford until December 1840, so it is reasonable to assume that the Sisters came to her attention during her school days in Dublin, as they went about their errands of mercy. There is no evidence that she knew any of them personally, and certainly Catherine McAuley does not seem to have known of her prior to the time she sought admission to the convent here in Baggot Street.

Ellen Whitty entered the Sisters of Mercy on 15 January 1839. She received the habit and the name Sister Mary Vincent on 23 July that year and professed her vows on 19 August 1841. She was among the last group of novices to receive their preparation for profession directly from Catherine herself as

Catherine died on 11 November that year. The young SM Vincent is remembered as one of those who maintained vigil at the bedside of the dying Catherine McAuley, and her letters to MM Cecilia Marmion during this time are among the most poignant of all extant Mercy correspondence. SM Vincent is recorded as the first person to be registered as a nun in the newly-approved Baggot Street National School, and she obtained her teacher's certificate in 1843. The same year she was appointed the community Bursar, and in May 1844 she became Novice Mistress, a position she was to hold until her election as the fourth Reverend Mother of Baggot Street in September 1849, following the sudden death of MM Cecilia Marmion. Ellen Whitty was just thirty years of age.

Her six years as Rev Mother were years of innovation, creative energy and resourcefulness as she dealt with new foundations at home and abroad, took responsibility for the nursing services in the Jervis Street Hospital, sent Sisters to nurse in Crimea, and began the planning for the Dublin Mater Hospital. These were also the years of the Great Famine and in a letter written in 1852, Mother Vincent notes that 'in the past two years alone, we have attended to the wants, instruction and relief of 22,285 people.' One wonders where she found the time to write any letters at all!

In May 1855, at the conclusion of her second term as Rev Mother, Mother Vincent was elected Mother Assistant and later that year was again appointed Novice Mistress here in Baggot Street. However, for sometime her thoughts had been turning to the foreign missions, and in 1860 she offered her services to James Quinn, the newly appointed Bishop of Brisbane. Despite strong opposition from her community, Mother Vincent sailed for Australia in December 1860. She was to spend the rest of her life in Brisbane, apart from a two year sojourn in Ireland in 1871-72. She only held the office of Rev Mother in Brisbane for five years, as she was deposed by Bishop Quinn in 1865. She accepted this humiliation with characteristic grace and dignity, and continued to exercise a strong but gentle influence in the community until her death in 1892. Six months before her death, Mother Vincent celebrated her Golden Jubilee, the first Sister of Mercy in Australia to reach this milestone. The many letters written to her on this occasion, as well as the tributes paid to her following her death are proof of the esteem in which she was held by people in

all walks of life both in Australia and elsewhere. This short summary of her life does not do her justice, but the letters which she wrote, and those which were written to or about her bear testament to a woman of great faith, persistence and courage in the face of incredible difficulties.

It has been both a privilege and a responsibility for my colleague Sr Pauline Smoothy and me to prepare this volume of Mother Vincent's correspondence for publication. A privilege, because it has enabled both of us to get to know better our Brisbane foundress; and a responsibility, because we were conscious that for the most part we were dealing with words and sentiments that were not our own. For that reason, we needed to be very careful to honour the intention of those who wrote so long ago and in circumstances so different from our own. A word mistranscribed, a phrase misinterpreted, a comma misplaced could so easily alter the intention of the original authors who are not longer here to speak for themselves. That being said, we are very proud of the final product, but we wish to place on record that while our names are on the cover, there are many people, some of whom are here today, who have contributed to the book in so many ways. We hope we have suitably acknowledged them in the appropriate place.

This book has been over ten years in the making. It really began when a small group of Brisbane Sisters decided, as a project to commemorate the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Brisbane Congregation, to publish the letters of Mother Vincent which were housed in our Brisbane archives. This resulted in a small volume which I know that some of you have read. While it undoubtedly served a purpose, we quickly recognised its shortcomings and decided to improve on it. Someone suggested that 'next time' we should include not only the letters written *by* Mother Vincent but those written *to* her as well – we had discovered quite a few of these in our archives. That sounded like a good idea, so several of us got to work transcribing all the letters we could find – it proved to be a very ambitious project and for various reasons, the editorial work continued in rather sporadic fashion over the next few years. It was not until our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary was looming that Pauline Smoothy and I decided that if we didn't do something with the transcripts now, they would never see the light of day.

So we got to work, and discovered that not all of Mother Vincent's correspondence was housed in Brisbane – the Mercy archives in Dublin and elsewhere, diocesan archives in Dublin, Belfast , Perth and Brisbane, and the archives of the Irish College in Rome all yielded up letters, many of which we didn't know existed until we went looking. It turned out to be a much larger project than either of us originally anticipated. We eventually ended up with over 360 letters, and I am sure that, despite our best efforts, there could others out there still waiting to be discovered. However, we had to call a halt to our searching, or this volume would never had got to the printers. It was a considerable source of amazement to us that so many letters have survived for so long. The first of them was written in 1839, one hundred and seventy-three years ago, the last in 1892, almost one hundred and twenty years ago, so altogether they span a period of over fifty years. In this world of instant communication, one wonders whether the correspondence of our 'throw away' society will last as long. Indeed, one might well ask if the art of letter writing isn't already going the way of the dinosaurs!!

Our first job was to ensure we had accurate transcriptions of all the letters. This was not an easy task, considering the fragile condition of some of the autographs, the inevitable fading of ink, the vagaries of 19<sup>th</sup> century handwriting, spelling and grammar, the occasional use of words now obsolete, and the annoying habit many people had back then of 'crossing' their letters – presumably to save paper. Some of the autographs even had splotches of candle grease or burned sections where they had got too close to their light source. It was a reminder to us that a hundred years ago, candles were the only form of lighting available in domestic settings. Many of the letters seem to have been written in great haste and there is a tendency for their authors to run one sentence into another, or to punctuate with dashes instead of full stops. We endeavoured to remain as close to the original texts as possible, while making some changes to improve readability.

Next came the process of annotating the documents to make them more intelligible to the present day reader. This involved a lot of detective work and we trawled through census records, shipping lists, cemetery records, old newspapers, and the archives of several congregations. Pauline in particular spent a lot of time in the Dublin Diocesan archives and the archives of the

Mercy International Centre trying to discover not only who were the authors of all the letters, but also who were the people and events mentioned therein. Mercy congregations throughout the world seem to have a plethora of sisters called Ignatius, Liguori, Aloysius or Evangelist. It was not always easy to work out which one was which. Google became our new best friend, and we both said on frequent occasions 'Thank God for the internet!' How researchers of previous generations managed without it we will never know. Despite our exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) search efforts, however, some people still remained elusive, but I am coming to the conclusion that if you can't be found somewhere on the world wide web, then you probably don't exist!

One of the most challenging tasks we had was to keep the total number of words to the maximum agreed with our publisher. Inevitably this involved some culling. This was something which we were reluctant to do, but we realized that the publication had to be kept to a reasonable size. 200,000 words was the magical number, and we had long and vigorous debate about what to include and what to omit. I can assure you that none of Mother Vincent's own letters were left out! Those that were, were mostly of an inconsequential nature, or peripheral to the life of Mother Vincent herself.

Finally, I'd would like to share with you a little of what is actually between the covers of the book. and to read excerpts from some of the letters. Hopefully this will give you a flavour of the breadth of topics to be found in the volume and whet your appetite to read more! The most important letters in the collection as far as the Sisters of Mercy are concerned are those written towards the end of 1841, between the young Sister Mary Vincent Whitty and the older Mother Cecilia Marmion at the time of Catherine McAuley's death. Cecilia was a longtime friend of Catherine, but at the time of Catherine's death she was in Birmingham. Vincent Whitty was at Catherine's bedside and was able to provide Cecilia (and us) with almost hourly accounts of Catherine's last days. One can sense in the letters which went back and forth across the Irish Sea, Cecilia's anxiety about the condition of her friend and SM Vincent's efforts to relay as much information as possible. Thanks to this exchange of letters over the course of several days, we have an eyewitness account of the death of the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. This letter from SM Vincent dated 11

November 1841 describes the scene in Catherine's room over an eleven hour period on the day of her death: **Letter 10 p.25**

One of the most courageous decisions Mother Vincent made when she was Reverend Mother in Baggot Street was to send Sisters to nurse the wounded during the Crimean War. This historic letter is from Mother Vincent to Dr William Yore then Vicar-General of Dublin, seeking permission to offer the services of the Sisters of Mercy to the British government. **Letter 72, p.105**

There are also letters which illustrate the social history of the times, such as this one from the residents of Herbert Street, addressed to Mr John Vernon, the agent for Sir Sidney Herbert, who the landlord of the Baggot Street property. **Letter 78, p.111.** It is signed by nineteen residents!

Mr Vernon duly passed the complaint to Mother Vincent: **Letter 79 p.111.** However, we have no copy of M Vincent's reply. No doubt she was amused at the small things which upset the neighbours.

During her time as Rev Mother in Baggot Street, Mother Vincent wrote letters to landlords about rent payments, to Bishops and Archbishops about new foundations, to her neighbours about closing off the laneway from Herbert Street. Of particular interest is the protracted correspondence between M Vincent and Dean Meyler over the appointment of a chaplain to the community, and yes, this was the same Dean Meyler with whom Catherine McAuley had had similar problems a decade or so earlier. Some things never change! There are also several letters written to M Vincent by members of the foundation group to Perth. These provide a wonderful chronicle of the hardships endured not just by the Sisters of Mercy, a, but by the thousands of Irish migrants who crossed the seas to Australia and other places during the nineteenth century.

In several letters to Baggot Street during the early years of the Brisbane foundation, Mother Vincent tells of her concerns - the illness of several sisters, the departure or death of others, the shortage of personnel to carry on the work of the mission, the crushing debt on All Hallows' Convent, and of course her difficulties with the Bishop. In spite of her tribulations, she can also take pleasure in small details in the world around her, as is shown in this delightful

letter written from All Hallows' in 1875 to SM Francis Hewston: **Letter 233 p.267.**

You will be pleased to know that the magnolia tree survived, and can still be seen today in front of All Hallows' Convent.

Many of the letters written to or about Mother Vincent, particularly in her latter years show that she was universally admired and loved, but perhaps the greatest tribute came from Archbishop Dunne, who is writing to her from Ireland during his visit there in 1890. He is describing his meeting with a childhood friend of the Whitty family:

*..... sitting next to me at dinner was an old priest, Canon Kennedy. He seems to have known you, when you were a baby in arms, and your brother Robert the same... He chattered and questioned about you all the dinner long, thro' soup and fish and meat and sweets. .... Now I won't tell you what sort of an account I gave of you; but one word I said specially took the good old man's fancy. It was when I told him that you are a little bottle of patent diamond cement.*

*Whenever, I said, there is a break or a crack or a falling out of any sort, Mother Vincent is the diamond cement that brings things together again and united stronger than ever, the separated parts.*

Unfortunately we don't have time now to read any more, but between the covers of the book you will find letters written by a veritable 'who's who' of the Mercy world – women such as Evangelist Forde and Liguori Keenan, who were former Rev Mothers of this house, Anastasia Beckett of Birr, Paul Cullen of Westport, Catherine Maher of Carlow, Liguori Gibson of Liverpool, Juliana Hardman of Birmingham, Ignatius Prendergast of Auckland. There's even one from a Mother di Pazzi Bentley from St Louis in the USA. They provide interesting snippets of Mercy life in all these various places. One of my favourites is from M Gabriel Sherlock of Kyneton, Victoria. It is dated 20 March 1892, and it contains an account of the reception of Fannie McAuley, daughter of 'wild Willie', Catherine's nephew. She even promises to send a piece of the reception cake!

To read these letters is to bring to life Mother Vincent, her times and some of her contemporaries as only the immediacy and intimacy of a letter can. In today's world of spontaneous, instant and largely ephemeral communication, the correspondence of Mother Vincent reminds us that 'social networking' is not a new phenomenon. These letters, reliant on pen and ink, are of necessity more reflective and more enduring than the twitters, tweets and emails which characterise much of today's communication. They provide refreshing insights into the life of a woman who was warm and affectionate, a woman of faith who was resilient in difficult circumstances, and a woman at home with all classes of society. They also provide a wealth of primary source material not just about the Sisters of Mercy, but about the religious and social history of Victorian Dublin and colonial Australia. So they will have an interest beyond just Mercy circles. We have reason to be grateful to those who have preserved these letters over the past one hundred and seventy-three years, and Pauline and I feel very privileged to have made them available in this format to future generations.