

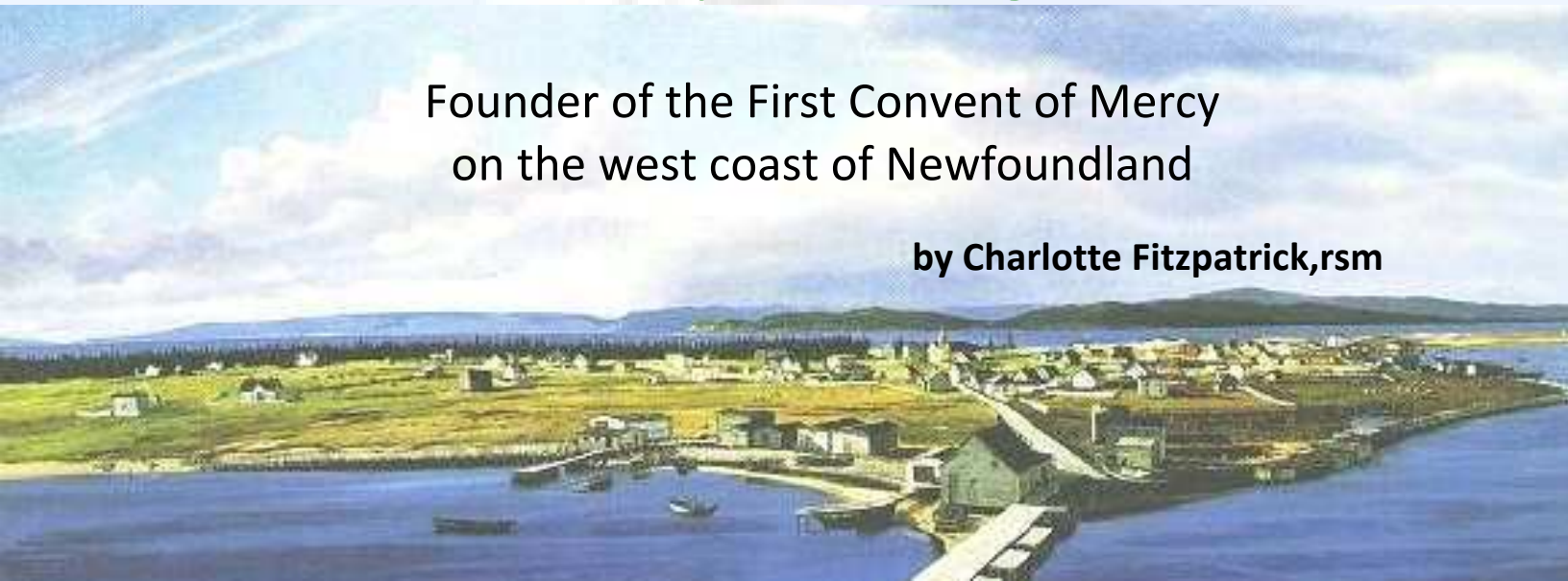
# WOMAN OF PROVIDENCE



## The Life of Sister Mary Antonio Egan, rsm

Founder of the First Convent of Mercy  
on the west coast of Newfoundland

by Charlotte Fitzpatrick, rsm



*What you can plan is too small for you to live...<sup>1</sup>*

Sister Mary Antonio Egan, the founder of the first Convent of Mercy on Newfoundland's west coast, would have undoubtedly nodded in agreement at poet David Whyte's wise comment on life. The call of the mission in the late nineteenth century took her from the comfortable academic and cultural milieu of convent life and ministry in Providence, Rhode Island, to a foreign, harsh environment with very rudimentary educational and social structures. It was in this environment of hardship and struggle in Bay St. George, Newfoundland, that Sister Mary Antonio and her companions gave birth to a dream that would change their lives and the lives of all who were touched by their ministry of Mercy.

## **The French Treaty Shore**

The west coast of Newfoundland had long suffered the effects of the so-called "French Treaty Shore." The Treaty of Utrecht, ratified by Britain and France in 1713 and confirmed by various treaties thereafter, allowed the French to fish in season on the coast of Newfoundland between Cape Bonavista and Point Riche. Over the years, disagreements and conflicts often arose between the Newfoundland and the French fishermen, largely due to different interpretations of the various treaties. These disputes inevitably interfered with the settlement and development of a large section of the island. When the boundaries of the French Shore were changed by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783 to include the whole area from Cape St. John on the northeastern tip of the Baie Verte peninsula to Cape Ray on the southwest corner of the island, Bay St. George became part of the French Shore.

For much of the nineteenth century, settlers on the French Shore were under constant threat of aggression and unfair competition. Bishop Howley, writing in the latter part of the century, deemed the fishing/curing rights conceded by Britain and France in the various treaties to be unjust to the people of Newfoundland. In his words, these rights were

... an endless source of bickering and discontent between the fishermen of France and the inhabitants of the Island of Newfoundland and a heavy clog upon the progress of the colony.<sup>2</sup>



These conditions prevailed until 1904, when Britain and France resolved many of their long-standing disputes, and France finally agreed that the fishing clauses of the old treaties should be revoked.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, with the arrival of the Acadians from Cape Breton, Bay St. George had become a focal area of French settlement. By mid-century, its main settlement, Pointe-de-Sable or Sandy Point, was recognized as the commercial and religious center of the whole west coast. Father Alexis Belanger, the first resident priest on the west coast, made his home in Sandy Point from 1850 to his death in 1868, devoting most of his time and attention to that settlement.<sup>3</sup>

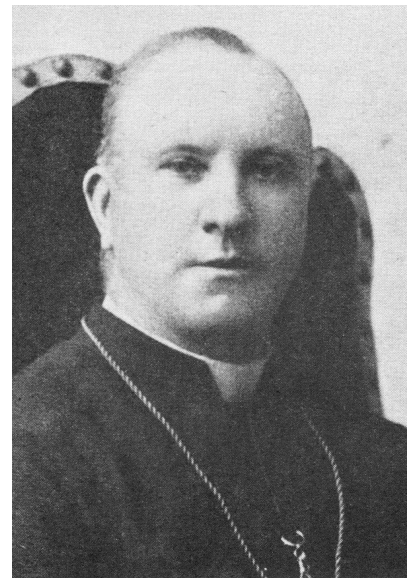
### ***The Dream Expressed***

Western Newfoundland was attached to the St. John's diocese until 1870, when it was constituted a Prefecture Apostolic and Father Thomas Sears was named Prefect Apostolic.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1873 in a report to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Father Sears expressed his dream of having a community of nuns to educate the young women of his parish", which then comprised most of the west coast. He wrote:

Could we afford to establish a good seminary of Instruction for females as the first beginning we would gain much. A convent of five or six well-educated nuns would be of the greatest importance ...<sup>5</sup>

Father Sears' dream would come to fruition some twenty years later in a marvellous chain of events that could only be seen as the providence of God at work.

It was Father Sears' successor and friend, Reverend Michael Francis Howley, who would bring a community of nuns to Newfoundland's west coast. A highly intelligent, energetic and visionary man, Michael Francis Howley became Prefect Apostolic of the west coast of the island in 1885, Sandy Point being the seat of the Prefecture. Full of ideas and zeal for the advancement of his extensive mission, Bishop Howley realized that his starting point and focus had to be the promotion of education and religion throughout the area. Like his predecessor, Father Sears, he saw the importance of a community of sisters to help him carry out his missionary goals.



## ***Relationships Forged***

Meanwhile, in another part of the world, events were unfolding that would give life to a long-held dream and change the lives of many in the process. On a riverboat in Massachusetts, sometime in the mid 1880s, a wealthy and well-travelled American woman, Mrs. Henrietta Brownell, met Sister M. Juliana Purcell, a Sister of Mercy from St. Xavier's Convent in Providence, Rhode Island. Sometime later, the chance finding of a medal of the Virgin Mary by Mrs. Brownell led her to St. Xavier's, a circumstance that forged relationships which would profoundly affect the lives of all concerned. A lasting friendship developed between Mrs. Brownell and Sister Juliana, and indeed the whole St. Xavier's community welcomed Mrs. Brownell as friend and benefactor.

Henrietta Knowlton Brownell was born in Bristol, Rhode Island in 1837. Her first husband, George A. Pierce, died sometime in the early 1860s. When the Sisters of Mercy met Henrietta, she was the wife of Charles De Wolf Brownell, a lawyer and a renowned landscape artist. From her first marriage, she had two children, a boy and a girl, and the Brownells had four sons. The family travelled extensively, with Mr. Brownell devoting himself to painting his landscapes. Henrietta was a very talented lady, a writer and an accomplished musician with a proficiency in piano and violin. In gratitude to the sisters at St. Xavier's for their kindness to her, she offered to teach violin to any of them who desired to learn, and with the permission of the local superior, a number of the sisters took lessons. This brought Mrs. Brownell into frequent contact with the sisters, and over time she developed a close relationship with another community member of St. Xavier's, Sister Mary Antonio Egan.

After Mrs. Brownell converted to Catholicism in the late 1880s, she made the decision to use some of her wealth to finance the establishment of a convent in a missionary country. She discussed her plans with Sisters Juliana and Antonio, who shared her enthusiasm for such a worthy venture. When Sister Juliana died in 1888, Sister M. Antonio became her main confidante and advisor.

## ***Early Life of the Founder***

Sister Mary Antonio, born Elizabeth Egan in England on May 12, 1852, came with her father, brothers and sister to the United States at an early age to live with an aunt. She attended St. Xavier's Convent School, a private school begun by the Sisters of Mercy in Providence in 1856. She entered the community at St. Xavier's in May, 1868 and was professed on January 1, 1871.



In *The Leaves of the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy* we read that she was one of the sisters who devotedly nursed a pioneer sister in Providence in her last illness.<sup>6</sup> This reference, brief though it is, indicates the spirit of mercy and compassion that characterized Sister Antonio throughout her life and ministry.

Sister Antonio was entrusted with many responsibilities in the Congregation and was said to have been extremely gifted as a teacher and administrator. She was elected Superior of St. Xavier's at the Chapter of 1866, but she declined the office.<sup>7</sup> Another Chapter was held at St. Xavier's in July 1888, and Sister Antonio was again elected Superior. This time, she was prepared to assume the responsibility, but Bishop Matthew Harkins, who presided at the Chapter of Elections, refused to accept her.<sup>8</sup> Three separate votes were held, with Sister Antonio receiving the majority each time. However, the Bishop was inflexible in his decision and instead appointed Sister Mary Mechtilde Brennan as Superior. In his record of events, he stated that Sister Mary Antonio "was certainly unqualified for the office of Superior." In the same notes he writes of her close friendship with Mrs. Brownell, the negative impact it had on the discharge of her duties, the efforts of superiors to discourage this friendship and Sister Antonio's persistence in maintaining it.<sup>9</sup> This situation seems to have been at the heart of Bishop Harkins' refusal to confirm Sister Antonio's election.

Up to the second half of the twentieth century, all aspects of convent life were highly regulated, and the ideal sister was one who followed the Rule in every respect. In the area of relationships, the good religious was expected to be charitable to all but emotionally detached from everyone. Thus, relationship as an essential component of human life and growth, was neglected or ignored to the detriment of the sister herself, her community, her family, her colleagues and associates. In such a closed milieu, friendship or any close relationship was practically impossible, and was almost viewed as an aberration.

Although the bishop and the Superiors of the Providence community were following the norms of the day regarding the election process, they probably overreacted in Sister M. Antonio's case; on the other hand, the cloud of suspicion and mistrust that covered Sister Antonio likely caused her to turn even more towards the friendship and support offered by Mrs. Brownell.<sup>10</sup> This troubling set of circumstances brought untold distress and anguish to those on both sides of the situation.

Loyalties were divided in the Providence community itself. Some sisters remained friends and supporters of Sister Antonio; others were very critical of her and reported her every move, especially her interactions with Mrs. Brownell.

In September of 1888, Sister Antonio was transferred from the Fall River Convent where she had been local superior at St. Mary's Seminary in Bayview, a girls' boarding school in Providence established by the Sisters of Mercy in 1874 as an outgrowth of St. Xavier's.



By December of that year, frustrated and pained by the endless criticism and gossip, Sister Antonio made plans to leave Religious Life, but providentially reconsidered and decided to remain a Sister of Mercy. In the summer of 1889, she was recalled to the motherhouse, where the superior could keep an eye on her and restrict her meetings with Mrs. Brownell.<sup>11</sup> Despite all, the two continued to meet, and undoubtedly the dream of a new foundation in missionary territory was uppermost in their conversations.

## ***Unfolding the Dream***



Sister Corsini Dempsey, another member of St. Xavier's community, had lived in St. John's as a child, and through continued contacts with her Newfoundland friends, became aware of the educational and spiritual needs of the people on the west coast of Newfoundland. Aware too of Mrs. Brownell's desire, she approached her in late 1892 and asked her to consider financing a convent of the Sisters of Mercy in the missionary territory of western Newfoundland.

Having received a positive response from Mrs. Brownell as well as the permission of her religious superiors, Sister M. Corsini wrote Bishop Howley on November 17, 1892, setting forth her proposal for establishing a convent of the Sisters of Mercy in his area. Normally foundations of the Sisters of Mercy are initiated by requests from bishops to the leaders of the

congregation. This situation was unusual in that the initiative came from individual sisters and a lay woman. Even so, the Newfoundland foundation from Providence did have the permission and approval of its religious superiors, both diocesan and congregational.

When Bishop Howley received Sister M. Corsini's letter with its very welcome news of a possibility of a community of nuns for his mission, he immediately made plans to travel to the United States. He met with Mrs. Brownell on January 31, 1893 and the next day with Bishop Matthew Harkins of the Providence Diocese and with the four sisters who had volunteered for the mission - Sister Mary Antonio Egan, Sister Mary Corsini Dempsey, Sister Mary Veronica Payne and Sister Mary Sylvester Carver. On February 4, Bishop Howley, Mrs. Brownell, Sister Antonio and Sister Corsini met at Boston College to sign the papers of Agreement regarding the new foundation at Sandy Point. Bishop Howley's Diary notes that at this time Mrs. Brownell turned over to him the amount of \$11,858.44 in Bonds and Bank Deposits.<sup>12</sup> When his business was completed, the bishop returned to Newfoundland, and it was Sister Antonio who continued the work associated with founding a new mission. She was well able for the task.

One of the first pieces of business to be negotiated was the canonical transfer of the four volunteer sisters from the jurisdiction of Bishop Harkins of Providence to that of Bishop Howley of Western Newfoundland, which by this time had been elevated to the status of Vicariate. Correspondence between Sister Antonio and Bishop Harkins, between her and Bishop Howley and between the two Bishops highlights the key role she played in this process. In some of these letters we catch glimpses of the problems she encountered in her dealings with Bishop Harkins. The path was not always smooth, but she continued to steer the course and move the process forward. In a letter to Bishop Harkins on March 12, 1893, she names the three sisters who were to accompany her to the Newfoundland foundation. She assured the Bishop that she had not influenced the sisters in their decision...

On the contrary, I have put before those who did not know the place, the hardships and privations they might expect...

Tellingly, she adds the following:

I trust time will prove that our motives and intentions are all for the Greater Glory of God.<sup>13</sup>

In a subsequent letter on May 16, 1893, Sister Antonio clarified some matters regarding the permission granted for the Newfoundland mission, as the bishop seemed sceptical as to whether or not she had personally obtained that necessary permission.<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Howley was aware of some of these difficulties and did what he could to facilitate the process. In a letter to Bishop Harkins on May 9, 1893 he referred to correspondence he had recently received from Sister Antonio, which included a form given to her by the Reverend Mother for her signature. Bishop Howley assured him that there was no hurry about signing such a form and he further stated

...The document did not quite come up to my idea of what is required. It is rather harsh and unsisterly in tone.

With that letter, he forwarded Bishop Harkins another form, which he thought might be more acceptable. Interestingly enough, it was adapted from an agreement made between the Bishop of Galway and the Presentation Sisters when they made their foundation in Newfoundland in the 1830s.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Bishop Howley was in contact with Reverend Mother Mechtilde of the Sisters of Mercy of Providence, confirming his commitment to the sisters who would come to the new foundation at Sandy Point:

I hereby promise and declare that I shall make ample provision financially and in every other respect for the Sisters, so that they shall be able to carry out their good work and shall not be a source of any anxiety to you.<sup>16</sup>

On July 15, 1893 each of the four sisters signed a form, stating that she had, at her own request, been canonically dispensed from obedience to the Bishop of Providence and to the Superior of the Sisters of Mercy of Providence in order to form a new community, being established by Bishop Howley in Western Newfoundland. At the same time each sister renounced any right to return to the Diocese of Providence or to any religious congregation within that diocese.<sup>17</sup> This was essentially the last of the legalities to be negotiated, and, with that completed, all was ready for the new venture.

### ***Hurrah for Foundations!***

On July 13, 1893 Bishop Howley left Newfoundland for Rhode Island to escort the pioneer band to Sandy Point. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of that month, he, along with the four sisters and Mrs. Brownell, boarded the *Olivette* for Halifax.<sup>18</sup> Since Sister Sylvester Carver was a Haligonian who had entered the Sisters of Mercy in Providence in 1880, we can perhaps assume that she visited family during their six-day stopover in Halifax. Sailing from there aboard the *SS Harlow*, the missionary group arrived at Sandy Point on Friday, July 28. The dream that Father Thomas Sears had articulated in his report of 1873 had finally taken shape, and the new mission of the Sisters of Mercy in Sandy Point was about to begin.

*The Evening Telegram* of August 12, 1893 records with great detail and colour the arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy to Newfoundland's



west coast. At Sandy Point the missionaries received an enthusiastic welcome, replete with evergreen arches, wreaths, flags, processions and salvos of gunfire. Magistrate M.E. Dwyer, Esq., J.P. gave an address of welcome on behalf of the lay people and Father P.W. Brown spoke on behalf of the clergy. The people themselves...

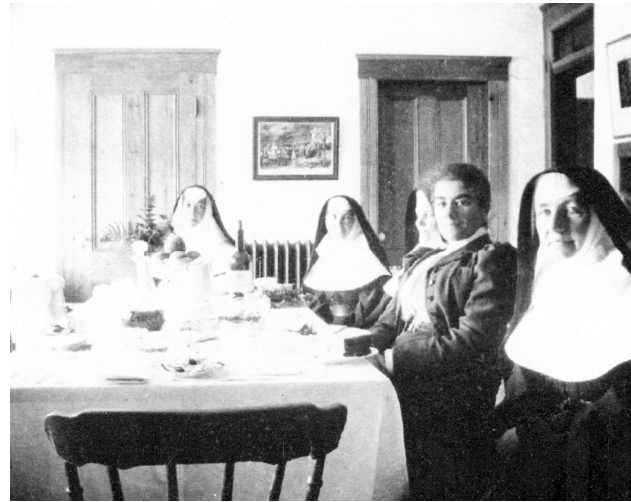
...displayed the most unbounded enthusiasm and interest in the arrival of the nuns and flocked around them in their own simple ways as the harbingers of great future blessings to this place<sup>19</sup>



The paper further stated that the nuns would take charge of the public school immediately after the summer vacation, and that there were plans to open a branch for higher education in the near future.

## ***The Realities of Mission Life***

The pioneer group must have been thrilled with their reception by the people, but when the festivities were over, they were faced with the stark realities of missionary life in western Newfoundland. Though Sandy Point was its largest year-round settlement, a bustling port and the hub of the Bay St. George fishery, the effects of the French Treaty Shore were still very much in evidence. The area was largely undeveloped and lacking in any amenities consistent with progress. The houses were rude shelters and the roads were mere footpaths. But the sisters seemed undeterred both in their resolve and in their zeal, and they prepared assiduously for the opening of school in September.



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Memories from sisters who lived with members of the founding community speak of the unimaginable differences between the school environments of Providence and Sandy Point.<sup>20</sup> St. Xavier's and St. Mary's where Sister Antonio had been administrator and teacher, boasted stately buildings, well-kept grounds, splendid equipment, large libraries, art studios, chapels, fine arts programs, and Literary Societies.<sup>21</sup> The school at Sandy Point was a combination school-hall, a crude structure, part of which had been the log cabin home of Father Belanger. Most of the children were extremely poor, lacking food and proper clothing. They had little or no knowledge of their faith. In addition, those of French extraction spoke a dialect the sisters found difficult to understand. Since instruction was in English, this made school more problematic for both children and sisters.

Despite all the deficiencies and difficulties, the sisters were not discouraged. These courageous and talented women, supported by their sponsor and friend, Mrs. Brownell, began the arduous work of developing the educational, spiritual and social capacity of their young scholars. Mrs. Brownell



stayed with the sisters for the winter months each year, teaching in the day school, doing night classes with post-school-age youth, training a choir and joining the sisters in visitation of the sick. Besides sharing her many talents in the school and community, Mrs. Brownell was a generous benefactor to the community. Each autumn she left Providence, laden with warm clothing for the poor and with candy and Christmas gifts for every child.<sup>22</sup> Her arrival at Sandy Point was always an occasion of great anticipation and excitement for the sisters and for the community at large.

For two members of the founding community, mission life in western Newfoundland proved extremely difficult and unsettling. The youngest of the group, Sister M. Sylvester Carver, returned to the United States in December 1893, only five months after the mission began. We know that she made several unsuccessful attempts to re-enter the Sisters of Mercy in Providence, but there is little solid information about what happened to her afterwards. Sister M. Corsini Dempsey, who had played a key role in initiating the mission, was also experiencing dissatisfaction and unhappiness by the end of her first year at Sandy Point. Despite her signed disclaimer, she wrote Mother Mechtilde in Providence, requesting permission to re-enter the community. When her request was denied, she prevailed upon Sister Antonio to intercede for her, and Bishop Howley even wrote Bishop Harkins of Providence on her behalf. However, none of these efforts was successful, and Sister Corsini eventually returned to Sandy Point. While in the United States, she had taken advantage of art courses to hone her skills and stimulate new ideas, and these gifts she shared generously with her eager students.

The fourth member of the founding community, Sister Veronica Payne, was born in Kilkenny, Ireland. She entered the Sisters of Mercy at St. Xavier's Convent in 1868 and was professed on August 15, 1871. Her presence in the new foundation seemed to be a source of strength and stability for the convent, the school and the whole community. In the sixteen years of her ministry in Bay St. George, she endeared herself to all, and was known for her compassion, her wisdom, her astute leadership skills, and her zeal for teaching.

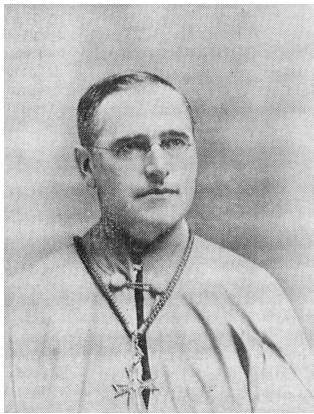
From the very beginning of the convent school, the sisters with the help of Mrs. Brownell worked tirelessly to provide an all-round education for the children of Sandy Point. During Easter Week, 1894 the convent school organized a concert, which was said to have been of "superior quality". The excellent and entertaining choruses, recitations, skits, songs and dances delighted the audience, especially in view of the fact that the Sisters had been there such a short time. Mrs. Brownell managed the musical part of the performance, with many of the violin and piano pieces being her own composition.<sup>23</sup> The school at Sandy Point from its earliest association



with the Sisters of Mercy, was obviously not confining its curriculum to the academic, but was developing a culture reflecting the beauty and value of the fine arts, a culture that had characterized St. Xavier's and St. Mary's. In time, the students of the convent school in Bay St. George became known for their love for and proficiency in music, song, painting and embroidery.

## ***Moving with the Times***

In 1895 the sisters' great friend and mentor, Bishop Michael Francis Howley, was appointed to the See of St. John's. His successor was Bishop Neil McNeil of Nova Scotia. Bishop McNeil was a wise and dynamic leader, who would endear himself to his people



and become a close friend of the Sisters of Mercy. Like his predecessor, he realized that, with the coming of the railway, it would be advantageous to have the seat of the Vicariate on the south side of the bay. There, directly on the railway line, the new town of St. George's was emerging, and the bishop began preparations for moving his residence, church, convent and school to that site. By 1897 he had built a cottage in St. George's, but the move didn't take place until 1898. The sisters continued to teach in the old school at Sandy Point until 1899, when the new school at St. George's was ready for occupancy.

Meanwhile, other major changes were taking place. In 1896, with only two of the original four sisters, Sisters Antonio and Veronica, left at Sandy Point, the first postulant was welcomed to the community. Bridget Sears, later known as Sister Mary Cecilia, was born in Ireland and educated in Paris. She had come to Newfoundland to visit her brother, Father Andrew Sears in the Bay of Islands, and through him, she learned of the great work being done by the Sisters of Mercy. A talented artist and musician and full of missionary zeal, she gave great hope to the fledgling community. She was professed May 9, 1899, but only lived five years as a Sister of Mercy, dying of tuberculosis on the fifth anniversary of her profession. A second postulant, Jane de Bourke of Nova Scotia who had come to Newfoundland as housekeeper to Bishop McNeil, entered at Sandy Point in 1898. She took the name Sister Teresa Joseph and lived a full and active life as cook and housekeeper in St. George's until her death in 1942.

## ***Death of Benefactor***

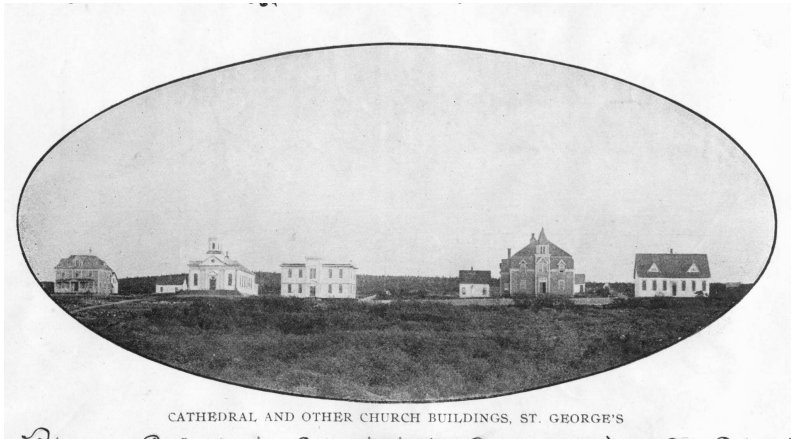
In October 1897 the sisters, children and community of Sandy Point were shocked and saddened by the sudden death of their dear friend and generous patron, Mrs. Henrietta Brownell. She died in a



Boston hotel, waiting for the ship that was to take her on her annual trip to western Newfoundland. Her trunks, laden with gifts for the children, were already on the ship, and these sailed on to Sandy Point, where they were received with gratitude, tinged with deep sadness. The whole community had lost a beloved and generous benefactor.<sup>24</sup>

## ***Across the Bay***

The move to St. George's and the opening of the new school, St. Michael's Academy, put the west coast mission on a much firmer footing. The physical environment of the new space was more conducive to learning, and the broad-based curriculum was designed to facilitate the



intellectual, spiritual and social development of the children. Business Education had been part of the school curriculum at Sandy Point and it continued to have a significant place in the course of studies at St. Michael's Academy, as did music and art. In his 1899 Report to the Department of Education, Superintendent Vincent Burke had great praise for what he saw at St. Michael's:

I was pleased with the proficiency shown by the pupils, according to their different standards. Under the management of the zealous and energetic ladies in charge, this school will, no doubt, produce very gratifying results in the near future. The Mother Superioress informed me that it was her intention to have resident students a little later on...<sup>25</sup>

Subsequent reports speak of the great progress made by the pupils under the direction of their capable and dedicated teachers.

Sister Mary Antonio, the leader of this team of talented and innovative teachers, was herself described as "one of the ablest teachers in the country."<sup>26</sup> Sister Mary Corsini was a genius with both needle and brush. Her classes in painting, needlework and embroidery undoubtedly helped to develop the aesthetic sense of her students and encouraged their creativity.

## More Good News!

In 1900 another piece of the long-held dream became a reality when St. Michael's Academy welcomed its first two resident students – Sarah Blanchard and Sarah Doyle. The latter eventually entered the Sisters of Mercy at Mercy Convent, St. John's, taking the name Sister Mary Dominic.

The first two Newfoundlanders joined the Sisters of Mercy in St. George's in 1905. Ellen Holden and Stella Wadden, both of St. John's, were given the names Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Xavier respectively. Very early in her religious life, Sister M. Xavier was given the opportunity for advanced study at the noted Conservatory of Music in Montreal. Even with such few members to manage an ever-increasing work load, the sisters realized the importance of having well-trained teachers. Upon her return to St. George's, Sister M. Xavier gave years of outstanding music education to students in St. George's and in other parts of the island.

In 1906 Mary Doyle from St. John's, later known as Sister Mary Agnes, entered the community. Much of what we know about the early years of the foundation on the west coast is believed to have been her record of events.

## Separations

In April 1909, Sister M. Veronica Payne, one of the pioneer band, died just after completing a three-year term as superior of St. Michael's. She had been a rock of strength for Sister M. Antonio in the early days of the foundation when there were just the two of them, and she was loved and respected by all who knew her. In recording her death, the editorial of the *Western Star* paid her great tribute:

She brought to the West Coast a zeal for teaching combined with some of the noblest of feminine traits, which has borne fruit in the present splendid condition of Catholic education at St. George's ... Mother Veronica was loved by all classes. All creeds and denominations respected her for a good and true woman whose life had been devoted to the task of making the world a better place to live in. <sup>27</sup>

Following shortly upon the death of their beloved Mother Veronica, the sisters and the people of St. George's experienced another shock, with the announcement of the transfer of Bishop McNeil to the Archdiocese of Vancouver. Under his tenure the Vicariate of St. George's had made such great strides in the religious and educational development of the area and in the increase in its Catholic population that it had been elevated to the status of a diocese. Bishop McNeil handed over to his successor, Michael Francis Power, a young diocese that was rich in promise, but beset with many challenges, not the least of



which were financial. Bishop Power, just 34 years old, took on the task with zeal and dedication, and in the eleven years of his episcopacy, became a well-loved spiritual leader for his people and a source of great support and strength for the sisters. His first major project was the building of an extension to St. Michael's Academy.

## ***Growth and Expansion***

With six sisters in the convent and increased enrolment in both boarding school and day school, lack of space was becoming problematic. In 1911, work on the new wing began, with funding coming from the sale of bonds donated by Mrs. Brownell.<sup>28</sup> During her lifetime this lady had been a wonderful friend to the struggling Vicariate, contributing generously to its upkeep and growth. The sale of these bonds in this particular time of

need ensured that the work she and the sisters had begun would continue and expand.



When the extension was ready for occupancy in 1913, it not only provided extra accommodations, but many modern conveniences, including central heating and plumbing. St. Michael's Academy was now a thoroughly modern, well-equipped educational institution, offering every convenience to facilitate the

education of its students. At the same time, it was becoming renowned for its diverse and comprehensive program of studies, which included courses in telegraphy, typing, bookkeeping, shorthand, embroidery, advanced needlework, painting, music and singing.

In 1914 St. Michael's Academy was recognized as a teacher-training academy, tasked to prepare Catholic teachers for the schools of western Newfoundland. In his Annual Report for that year, the Superintendent of Schools made the following notation:

Since the establishment of the school, there has been a steady upward trend in the conditions of the locality, and it has done not a little toward helping to promote that educational activity which is noticeable on the west coast.<sup>29</sup>

## ***Looking Back***

Sister Mary Antonio was superior of St. Michael's Convent from the time of its foundation until 1917, with the exception of three years when Sister Veronica Payne had assumed that responsibility. The fact that she steered a steady course in the midst of many trials

and obstacles in both convent and school is indicative of her remarkable faith, courage and determination. Records tell us that in all her years at St. George's, the sisters never heard her complain of loneliness, isolation, deprivation or hardship. Instead she seemed to adapt wholeheartedly to the way of life to which she had been called. In later life, she recalled her great anticipation and excitement at the coming of the mail by dog-team, and her practice of working out difficult math problems on the long winter nights "to redeem the time."<sup>30</sup>

But there were also long summer days, days when school was over and the sisters had time and space to enjoy the simple joys of outport life. In a letter to his sister, Bishop McNeil related a day's outing at Muddy Hole, where the sisters picked blueberries "which are abundant and large and sell for 15 cents per gallon."<sup>31</sup> We can imagine some of the sisters' conversations about life "back there" and life in their new home. We can also imagine the struggle of helping family and friends in the United States understand the realities they were living in this strange new land, to which they had been led by God's Providence.

Until she left St. George's in 1917, Sister Antonio continued the practice begun by Mrs. Brownell of giving parcels of clothing and candy to the poor and to the children of St. George's at Christmas. Whether these came from wealthy friends in the United States or from the sisters themselves, we do not know, but we do know that the poor were never forgotten and the children never neglected. Sister Antonio was obviously a woman whose missionary zeal never waned, a woman who took seriously her responsibilities as leader of a religious community and of an educational center that reached out to the whole community.

Meanwhile, Sister Mary Corsini seemed to have put all her earlier problems behind her, and having settled back into the community, dedicated all her energies to her beloved students. In fact, she came to be recognized and revered as an outstanding educator, whose work and influence made an invaluable contribution to the cultural development of the whole area.

By 1915 St. Michael's Academy was attracting students from all over western Newfoundland, and the number of sisters in the convent had increased to eleven. The convent and school at St. George's had come to maturity, and all was in readiness for the changes already becoming visible on the horizon.

In August 1916, St. Michael's Convent was one of the nine Convents of Mercy across Newfoundland amalgamated into one congregation. As its superior, Sister M. Antonio was a signatory of the Decree of Amalgamation. She was not a member of the first General Council appointed by the Bishops, but when Second Councillor, Sister Joseph Kelly died in 1917, she was named to the Council in her place. Consequently she moved to St. John's and took up residence at St. Bride's Convent, Littledale, where she taught classes at St. Bride's College and fulfilled her responsibilities as General Councillor. The

first General Chapter of the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, held in 1919, elected her as a member of Council. Undoubtedly, her years of service in the Providence Mercy community and her missionary experience in western Newfoundland enabled her to bring a unique perspective to the work of the Congregation's General Council.

Except for one year as Superior of St. Clare's Working Home for Girls in St. John's and another two years in St. George's, Sister M. Antonio remained at Littledale until her death on February 1, 1939 at the age of eighty seven years. Her obituary, carried in the February *Monitor*, speaks of her death as the peaceful close of the last chapter of a "singularly eventful career." It gave a glowing commendation of her exceptional achievements during forty-six years of life and ministry in Newfoundland:

Mother M. Antonio spared no effort to impart to the children in this land of her adoption, all that they might take of that education and culture for which she was so remarkable ... The work done for education in Newfoundland by Mother Antonio and her sisters is incalculable. Thoughtful students of the country and her times can give a fair appreciation. Only in the Book of Life is a full record preserved.<sup>32</sup>

The obituary went on to speak of her ailing health in her last years, noting however, that up to the end, she retained her keen interest in the congregation and its works and especially in its younger members.



## **Conclusion**

Sister Mary Antonio's incredible journey certainly could never be contained or sustained in any plan she would have devised for herself. The Lucan imperative

*Give and it will be given to you – a good measure,  
pressed down, shaken together, running over,  
will be put into your lap* (Luke 6:38)

can perhaps portray something of what made that journey so significant, so relevant, so empowering for us, who are privileged to share in her amazing Mercy odyssey.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David Whyte, *What To Remember When Waking*, poem from *The House Of Belonging*, Many Rivers Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Howley, *The Ecclesiastical History of Newfoundland*, Boston, Doyle and Whittle, 1888, page 116.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Brosnan, *Pioneer History of St. George's Newfoundland*, Mission Press, Toronto, 1940, page 10.

<sup>4</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, there are progressive stages for a missionary area to become a diocese. The first of these is Prefecture Apostolic. If the Prefecture flourishes, it is then elevated to the status of Vicariate, and then to a Diocese with its own bishop. Western Newfoundland became a Prefecture in 1870, a Vicariate in 1892 and a Diocese in its own right in 1904.

<sup>5</sup> Brosnan, page 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Leaves of the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, The Catholic Pub. Co., New York, 1899, Volume 111, page 142.

<sup>7</sup> St. Xavier's was the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Mercy of Providence, and its superior was the major superior of the whole congregation. Local superiors of the other convents in the diocese were ultimately accountable to the Reverend Mother at St. Xavier's.

<sup>8</sup> Because the Sisters of Mercy of Providence were a diocesan congregation at this time in their history, the bishop of the diocese presided over the Chapter of Elections for the Reverend Mother

<sup>9</sup> *Annals*, Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island.

<sup>10</sup> Kathrine Bellamy RSM, *Weavers of the Tapestry*, Flanker Press Ltd., St. John's, NL, 2006, page 261.

<sup>11</sup> Notarized Statement of Sister Germaine Thomey, November 19, 1892 in Archives of diocese of Providence.

<sup>12</sup> Diary of Michael F. Howley, January 31, 1892 in Archives of Archdiocese of St. John's. 106/12/3

<sup>13</sup> Archives of Diocese of Providence.

<sup>14</sup> Archives of Diocese of Providence.

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- <sup>15</sup> Archives of Diocese of Providence.
- <sup>16</sup> Archives of Diocese of Providence.
- <sup>17</sup> Archives of Diocese of Providence.
- <sup>18</sup> *Halifax Chronicle*, July 21, 1893.
- <sup>19</sup> *Evening Telegram*, August 12, 1893.
- <sup>20</sup> *Annals of St. Michael's Convent, St. Georges* – record of Sister Agnes Doyle, page 4.
- <sup>21</sup> J.A. & R.A. Reid, *Sisters of Mercy in Providence, RI, 1851-1893*, Providence, 1893.
- <sup>22</sup> *Annals of St. Michael's Convent, St. George's*, page 6.
- <sup>23</sup> *Evening Telegram*, April 21, 1894.
- <sup>24</sup> *Annals of St. Michael's Convent, St. George's*, page 7.
- <sup>25</sup> Report of Superintendent of Schools, December 31, 1899, Archdiocesan Archives, St. John's.
- <sup>26</sup> *Annals of St. Michael's Convent, St. George's*, page 10.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Western Star*, April 14, 1909.
- <sup>28</sup> Sister M. Williamina Hogan, *Pathways of Mercy*, Harry Cuff Publications, St. John's, NL, 1986, page 253.
- <sup>29</sup> Report of Superintendent of Schools, 1914, Archdiocesan Archives, St. John's.
- <sup>30</sup> Notes by Sister Mary Basil McCormack in preparation for her Master's Thesis – Archives of Sisters of Mercy, St. John's.
- <sup>31</sup> Brosnan, page 77.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Monitor*, February 22, 1939, Vol.6, No. 2.