

Where it all Began Catherine McAuley Sisters of Mercy



(This article was written in 1994 by some of the Sisters resident in the convent at the time.)

In 1827, two years before Catholic Emancipation was granted, Catherine McAuley, herself no stranger to poverty, opened a house for the relief of the poor, in Baggot St, Dublin. Her programme of social service included child care, teaching, visitation of the sick, shelter and training for unemployed girls, but not the

establishment of a Religious Congregation.

God decreed otherwise, and on 12th December 1831 Catherine became the Foundress of the largest religious Congregation ever established by an English-speaking Catholic. At her death, 11th November 1841, her associates numbered 140, 13 branches (2 of which were in England) had been sent out, and her Rule had been approved in Rome.

Today about 20,000 Sisters of Mercy carry out an extensive educational, medical and social apostolate in the spirit of Catherine McAuley whose conviction was that 'the poor need help today, not next week.' The Congregation now extends throughout the British and Channel Isles, USA, parts of Canada, Central and south America, West Indies, Guam Africa, India, New Guinea, Philippines, Friendly Isles, Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand.

Catherine, declared Venerable in 1990, marked a path for those who would Vow to serve Christ in His suffering members.

An Outline of the History of St Anne's Convent, Orpington

In 1894, Bishop Butt requested Reverend Mother of Bermondsey to undertake the charge of a Girls' Orphanage which he hoped to build at Orpington, Kent. From August 1893, the Presentation Brothers were already in charge of a school for boys on the same grounds. Their first Superior was Brother Louis. For the first seven years the boys and girls had to be accommodated in this same school which was St Joseph's. So the Sisters, on their arrival shared this building.

As the numbers increased, it became urgently necessary to erect another building – this work was put in hand, and in 1900 the Sisters and girls took possession of this new Children's Home which was dedicated to St Anne. They moved in on 24th September – the feast of Our Lady of Mercy.

Both schools were then Orphanages, and the following year they were recognised by the Local Government Board. The number of children who transferred from St Joseph's to St Anne's was 230. The purpose of having the Schools adjacent to each other was to keep families close together, so that relatives could visit them with the minimum of inconvenience.

In the beginning life was difficult, as such schools were not welcomed in this locality. It had been known that Shopkeepers had refused to serve "Papists." However this is past history, and in many case, these same people became generous benefactors of the schools.

In 1907, an anonymous donor gave money to build a Church. This was begun in August of that year, was completed on March 17th 1909 and dedicated to the Holy Innocents. This Church was situated between the two schools – St Anne's and St Joseph's. The Church bell was donated by the Past pupils of St Anne's and bears the inscription:

MOTHER OF MERCY PROTECT OUR SCHOOL AND PRAY FOR THE GIRLS OF ST ANNE'S,
WHO HUMBLY OFFER THIS BELL.

The Tabernacle and large candlesticks were given by the boys of St Joseph's School. At the time of the opening of the Church, there were about seven Catholic families in the area. One very wealthy family – Mrs Knight-Bruce with her two children-arrived for Sunday Mass in their horse-drawn carriage.

For some years the congregation was very small, only about a dozen people attending Holy Mass.

Reverend Father Linnett was appointed to the Chaplaincy in 1894, and continued until his death in 1912, when he was succeeded by Reverend Father Carroll. In later years, the Chaplains were Reverend Fathers, Cunningham, Albert Wood, Byrne and Pritchard who became the first Parish Priest. Later came Fathers Bovington, Slocombe and Michael Phelan.

At that time, no 74 Sevenoaks Road, was the Receiving Home where new children stayed until medical examinations and other formalities were completed and they were ready to be admitted into St Anne's – the main school building. In 1928, he Receiving Home was converted to a Nursery which was recognised for the training of nursery Nurses. In 1955, this Nursery training Centre was discontinued and the building adapted as a Family Group Home for 16 children – boys and girls.

The home was dedicated to the Holy Family.

Sister M Anastasia worked with loving dedication for many years in this same house, first with the nursery children, and then as 'House Mother' when it became Holy Family House.

From the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, a series of Family Group Homes were built in an effort to move away from the institutional life-style of the large orphanage buildings. The first of these built on St Anne's Drive were 'Iona' and 'Glendalough, and these were followed by 'Lisieux', 'Ancona', and 'Don Bosco'.

HAPPY - DAYS - AND - DAYS - OF – SHADOW

The children of St Anne's Orphanage received their early education in the happy, peaceful atmosphere of St Anne's voluntary school. From 1927, the whole school community enjoyed an annual two-weeks holiday in St Mary's Bay near Dymchurch. Like everyone else in this island, gathering war-clouds brought anxiety and disruption to St Anne's staff and pupils, although the trauma of the evacuation was not experienced until 1944 when the whole school was 'transferred' to st Helen's in Lancashire. All were on the move again in

January 1945, this time to Coventry from where they returned to Orpington six months later – ie one month after VE day.

In April 1954 the voluntary school became St Anne's Primary school, under the authority of the Kent education Committee and the warm-hearted headship of Sr M Angela Connors. Admissions were thenceforward extended to boys and girls in the area, and with the replacement of the orphanages by Family Group Homes over the following decade, the change of status was completed.

The erection of Family Homes presented the need to decide on the future use of the Orphanages. With help from the Southwark Children's Society, the building was eventually adapted to provide Staff accommodation in one wing, Children's Society offices in the Basement and a large spacious Convent which enabled the Sisters to move out of their very cramped quarters. 'Tara house – a part of the main building- was converted to an attractive flat for 'Letting'.

There came a time when the Sisters could no longer combine the task of 'House Mother' with teaching in the school, so some of the Children's Group Homes passed into the care of lay staff. Gradually too, the number of children coming into 'Care' decreased and a marked change in policy became evident. The Society now favoured 'Fostering' in preference to placing children in Homes. As a result, there was a further decrease in the numbers of admissions and some of the houses ceased to be used.

At this time also – on 17th July 1972 – the community (and locality) experienced a deep sense of loss in the death, from cancer, of Mother M. Ambrose McDonnell. Sister had been Administrator of St Anne's for 17 years and a dearly loved Superior of the community, so she was deeply mourned and sadly missed.

By 1979, plans were afoot for the building of a new Parish Church. The site of the old Church, that of the Orphanages, much of the land surrounding St Anne's and a large field (including a small cemetery) at the back of the Primary School were sold by the Diocese to finance the purchase of part of Coloma College in West Wickham for development as a Catholic Comprehensive School. The school became known as St John Rigby School, and it replaced St Joseph's School for Boys in Orpington and St Bernadette's school for Girls in St Paul's Cray.

This sale of land which had been brought so many years ago by Bishop Butt, truly ushered in a completely new era in the history of St Anne's and the Parish of Holy Innocents. The land was bought by Ideal Homes Developers and in no time the spacious green fields gave way to a Private Housing estate with a network of new roads, drives and cul-de-sacs, which totally changed the landscape and our local geography!

Reverend father Phelan was invited to submit suggestions for the names of some of the NEW ROADS. The Community was understandably delighted that appreciation of the dedication of two of their former members – Mother M Ambrose McDonnell and her predecessor Mother Marcellina Fallon – was expressed, in the naming of 'Ambrose Close' and 'Marcellina Way'.

The contribution of the Presentation Brothers to deprived boys received recognition in the naming of 'Stephen Close'.

That of the illustrious Bishop of Southwark who, at the turn of the century, bought all this land for his Orphanages, is commemorated in the naming of 'Bishop Butt Close'.

One wonders how many residents in years to come will ever associate the names of the roads with these good Religious who worked so hard and long in this area, caring for the poor and deprived.

1980

Early in the year-25th February – Sr Margaret Mary Canavan for many years a member of St Anne's Community, died in London University College Hospital. She had been suffering from cancer for over a year, but died peacefully and without undue suffering and for this all give thanks.

On 11th May the FOUNDATION STONE OF THE NEW HOLY INNOCENTS' CHURCH was laid amidst general rejoicing. The Sisters, Staff and Pupils of St Anne's School attended the Ceremony. The children stood on the lines of the marked out site, and so formed the 'shape' of the new Church- a strong reminder that these young people will in fact BE the Church of the future in Orpington. It was indeed a happy and hope-filled occasion.

TOPPING OUT CEREMONY

An important stage in the erection of any building is reaching its highest point, and the new Holy Innocents' church was ready for the celebration of reaching this stage on 8th October 1980. Again, the Staff and pupils vacated their classrooms in order to join in the Ceremonial-prayer intermixed with cheering- as the heavy steel Cross was hoisted and carefully positioned on the Church roof.

1981

On 20th September, the new Church was Officially opened, Consecrated and Dedicated to the Holy Innocents by Archbishop Michael Bowen. This was a joy-filled and (legitimately) proud occasion for Fr Phelan and his Parishioners, being the culmination of a great deal of hard work and, no doubt, many sleepless nights! It is a very fine Church, of unusual design and, by all accounts, is quite a feat of architecture and Engineering.

A new Presbytery formed part of the Church complex, and the Priests had already moved there from the house they had occupied – in Bishop Butt's Close – for about fifteen years.

MERCY ON THE MOVE

The move by the Clergy into their new Presbytery proved very opportune for the Sisters, since the (former) Orphanage building was due for demolition, and the Community of 10 members sought new premises. Reverend Mother in Bermondsey negotiated the purchase of the now vacated 'Presbytery' which needed very little restructuring for the conversion into a Convent.

One room was extended to a very prayerful chapel, and a large guestroom was divided to form two extra bedrooms for the Sisters. When the house had been tastefully decorated, it

was ready for occupation on 19th November, which, by a very happy coincidence is the Foundation day (1839) of the Mother House in Bermondsey.

The joy was, inevitably, tinged with sadness, as the last links with the original St Anne's were severed. For over eight decades, the impressive structure of St Anne's had been a dominant local feature and now, sadly, it awaited demolition. Time surely brings changes, but the *Sisters, Esther Boles (junior Professed), M Anastasia Connaughton, Angela Connors, Antonia Doyle, Anselm Hill, Kevin McGrath, Fidelis Mulvihill, Rita Nolan, Cecilia O'Donovan and Catherine Quane*, who took up residence in the 'new' Convent, agreed that they must look to the future, while appreciating the past:

'Hats off to the past, but Coats off to the future'!

1982 brought the closure of 'Glendalough'. Sr M. Fidelis Mulvihill was the last member of the community to work in the Children's home.

1983

In September, the Community was a part of the several groups of Sisters involved in the establishment of the INSTITUTE OF OUR LADY OF MERCY. This meant, in effect, that several autonomous Congregations of Sisters of Mercy in England, after prayerful consultation on every level, and following a series of regular meetings, decided to become ONE and formed the new Institute of Our Lady of Mercy, with the permission of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. Sister M. Imelda Keena (formerly of the Doncaster Community) was elected our first Superior General. So we moved into a new era in the history of our Congregation.

Orpington gradually became a unit within the Institute but without losing its special bonds with Bermondsey and all the former Branch Houses.

1984

In July of this year Sister M. Angela Connors retired from the Headship of St Anne's where she had worked so zealously for 30 years. She had become a household name for many families in Orpington.

1985

It was with great sadness that we heard, on the 2nd September that Fr Michael Phelan had died suddenly at his home in Borkwood way.

He was deeply mourned by all the parish, but the Sisters had a particularly keen sense of loss, as Father had always been a true friend.

The Church was packed to capacity for his Requiem Mass, and the route taken by his Funeral Procession was lined by the pupils of St Anne's Primary School, who stood to wave 'goodbye'.

1987

The 8th September brought a very special celebration – Sister M. Anselm's Diamond Jubilee of Profession. The well attended Mass of Thanksgiving was, at the request of Sr M. Anselm, joyfully celebrated by Mgr. Connelly from the Children's Rescue Society. It was followed by a leisurely buffet, during which there was ample time to reminisce, as one usually does on such occasions. We looked back on the long and faithful service which Sister M. Anselm had given to Sr Anne's and the Parish of holy Innocents. Her long years in the office where she

meticulously kept the Account Books to a high degree of accuracy, were recalled with affection and humour. We thank God for her loving and fruitful life.

1990

This year brought the following joyful announcement for the Sisters of Mercy everywhere:

TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY

Truly it was an occasion of heartfelt gladness when we received the news that our dear foundress had been honoured by Pope John Paul with the title of Venerable.

We can look forward now with confidence to the day when she will, D.V. be declared Blessed.

TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY

9/4/1990

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Vatican honours the 'walking nuns' founder

*CUTTING FROM
THE
'UNIVERSE'
26/4/1990*

THE POOR need help today, not next week, was the axiom the simple Irish woman, Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy who was honoured by Pope John Paul last week when he elevated her to "Venerable".

She was born into a comfortable middle-class family in north County Dublin and her interest in the less fortunate of society began in her mid-twenties when she took orphans into her home and helped the poor of her area.

This scandalised her family and contemporary society as her behaviour was thought unbecoming for a lady of breeding.

Eventually she moved into the city centre to teach in a poor parish school in the city centre before she decided to buy a site in the south city area of Baggot Street where school-rooms, dormitories and a chapel.

When it opened, in September 1827, 300 children and a number of women enrolled. Her work for the poor drew helpers in increasing numbers who set to work providing an expanding range of services unknown at that time.

Catherine never had any intention of founding a religious congregation, although everything she did was inspired by the Gospel. She lived in common with her companions, but she feared that a formal religious life would restrict the breadth of the apostolate she envisaged.

It was following a directive

from her friend, the then Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Daniel Murray, that she made her decision to take religious vows. She was professed in December 1831 with two companions and from then on her members were a familiar sight on the Dublin streets.

They became affectionately known as the "walking nuns" during the great cholera epidemic of 1832. In their time they were the most flexible congregation of nuns, with a constitution tailored so that they could respond to any situation quickly.

Catherine was over 50 years of age when she became a nun, but in the last 10 years of her life she saw a rapid expansion of her congregation.

She opened her first House in Britain at Bermondsey, east London in 1839, but she was already a dying woman when she opened the 14th foundation in Birmingham.

