CCHA, *Study Sessions*, 47(1980), 57-68

The Sisters of Charity of Halifax – The Early and Middle Years

by Sister Marianna O'GALLAGHER, S.C.H.
Quebec, P.Q.

The Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Halifax, form a pontifical institute whose motherhouse is at Halifax, Nova Scotia. In 1980 the congregation numbered 1244 members, living, working, studying, praying, from coast to coast, from the Yukon to Halifax, as well as in the United States, Bermuda, Peru, and the Dominican Republic. Their works encompass the traditional roles of religious sisters: teaching and administration in universities, colleges, elementary and high schools, both public and parochial; administration and nursing in hospitals, both public and private; nursing and care of the elderly and children in institutions; social work of many kinds, for example, in homes for unwed mothers and, most recently, in foster homes.

The community also has a long history of work in Indian schools, in Nova Scotia and British Columbia. Today new fields of work have been added: administrative work in chancery offices, in catechetics programs on both diocesan and parish levels; direction of retreat houses; chaplaincy work on the campus of universities, in hospitals, at military bases, in drug rehabilitation centers and in prisons. The variety of call and response found in these roles is possible because of the common sense heritage that is ours from both Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Elizabeth Anne Seton.[1] Saint

[1] Elizabeth BAYLEY (Mother Seton) was born in New York City in 1774, and died in Emmitsburg, Maryland, 47 years later. She was canonized in 1975.

In her short lifetime she married and had five children, was widowed, and battled to support her children and her principles. Born into an Episcopalian family of high society, she developed a devotion to the Scriptures early in her life.

Vincent wanted adaptability in the rule of life that he created for his Daughters of Charity in France in the 17th century. He had sought to make the rule as simple and unmonastic as possible, so that his Daughters of Charity might respond in uncomplicated fashion to the needs of the people as they saw them. He succeeded. North America as well as France has benefitted from Sisters of Charity response to needs both glamourous and gritty. The rule of Saint Vincent de Paul was brought to America by the Sulpicians, friends of Mother Seton in Emmitsburg. They had seen the work she and her Sisters were doing and concluded that Saint Vincent's rule was suitable.

Elizabeth herself, reflecting on the French Sisters' rule, admiring its simplicity, wrote: "The rule of our community amounts to that regularity necessary for order and no more." Saint Vincent had written his rule with a view to keeping his Daughters of Charity at the work for which they had come together: the care of the poor. He did not even want them called religious, lest they fall under the rigorous rule of cloister.

Elizabeth herself translated the rule for her community. She freely adapted the rule to the North American situation and to her personal circumstances. To be practical, she had to keep her children with her at Emmitsburg. Some of the Sulpicians dreamed of a union of the Emmitsburg Sisters with the Sisters in France, but that was impossible at the time. Over the years the rule

---

In an attempt to improve her husband's health, they undertook the usual cure for tuberculosis of the nineteenth century, namely a trip to Italy. There Elizabeth's husband died.

In Italy Elizabeth Bailey''s spiritual life grew and deepened in the midst of much adversity. The example of the faith of her friends, the Filichi family, led her to the Catholic Church. When she returned to Protestant New York she was ostracized, even by her own family. Providence guided her, and eventually she was led to Emmitsburg, Maryland, where, in the course of providing for herself and her children, she founded the Sisters of Charity. Mother Seton began the parochial school system in the United States, and set an example of reliance on God, and loyalty to the Church that has been rewarded with the honors of canonization.

There are many biographies of Mother Seton. *Mrs. Selon, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity*, by Joseph I. DIRVIN, C.M., is an authoritative biography from original sources. The Emmitsburg Sisters number 7-8000 in the U.S.A.

has been adapted, added to, subtracted from, in a repeated pendulum swing between spirit and legalism. The rules and constitutions in use today are an adaptation and distillation of the best. Mother Seton's Vincentian spirit and rule came to Canada with four Sisters of Charity in 1849.

The story of the Canadian foundation begins when four American ladies, black-robed, black-capped, landed in Halifax from the Cunard liner "Cambria" on May 11, 1849. They came from New York City, these first Sisters of Charity, in long-awaited response to a standing request by Bishop William Walsh of Halifax to his friend Archbishop John Hughes of New York for Sisters to work in his diocese in the care of orphans and in education. Halifax had a population of 20,000 when the four "American ladies" arrived. The Bishop gave them a house on Barrington Street, near the cathedral, where they took in a little orphan girl on the very first day. They immediately opened a school and by the end of the school year (July) their classes held 400 children. By that time the Sisters were also caring for twenty little girls in their own house. Thus began Saint Mary's, affectionately called by the Sisters of later years, "the cradle of the community." Out of that building were to come the beginnings of St. Patrick's School, the Halifax Infirmary, Saint Joseph's Orphanage, and many other schools of the city.

Sister Mary Basilia (Rose McCann) was the leader of the little group.[2]

---

[2] Here is the administration of Sisters of Charity, Halifax, 1849-1950:

1849		Mother Mary Basilia McCann
1858		Mother Mary Rose McAleer
1864		Mother Mary Josephine Carroll
1870		Mother Mary Elizabeth O'Neill
1876		Mother Mary Francis Maguire
1881		Mother Benedicta Harrington
1884		Mother Mary Cleophas Connors
1889		Mother Mary Bonaventure Kennedy
1895		Mother Mary Fidelis Eustace
1901		Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh
1908	1st General Chapter	Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh – Superior General
1926		Mother Mary Louise Meahan
1944		Mother Mary Evaristus Moran

Born in Ireland in 1811, she was educated at Emmitsburg, Maryland, and entered the Sisters of Charity there at the age of eighteen. Tradition has it that she was prepared for her First Communion by Mother Seton herself. This is quite possible, for Rose was ten years of age before Mother Seton died in 1821, and it is known that even in the midst of heavy administrative duties and her physical weakness, Elizabeth Seton made it a point to spend some time daily with the children of the school. However, even without that gracious personal touch, Sister Basilia McCann certainly received the full flavour of Elizabeth Seton's influence from her own pioneer Sisters at Emmitsburg.

With Sister Basilia came Sisters Mary Cornelia Finney and Mary Vincent Conklin, who had both trained at Emmitsburg ; and Sister Mary Rose McAleer, a newly professed Sister of 22 who was to become the next Mother Superior when the other three returned to New York.

Sister Basilia's training was in child care, and it was in this that Bishop Walsh of Halifax had asked the Sisters to labour. Halifax in 1849, like many other North American cities, was flooded with refugees, especially the Irish, victims of the potato famine. Organizing the care of their children was the beginning of the Sisters' work.

Halifax was a lively city. Garrison and seaport, it bustled with military and merchant business. Its people appear to have been endowed with a social consciousness that had echoes across the land and down the years. It appears that the very pluralism of its society made it possible for a minority group like Catholics to make a stand for their rights. Nova Scotia passed the first anti-slavery laws in the British Empire. Richard John Uniacke fought for and obtained the emancipation of Catholics in Nova Scotia. Need I mention Joe Howe and his defence of freedom of the press, and its influence on the granting of responsible government in the colonies. Needless to say, in such a socio-political climate, Catholics were encouraged to fight for and maintain their particular institutions.

As the city expanded, so did the newly established congregation of Sisters. In a few short years the Sisters became solidly accustomed to the educational system of the city. They were granted provincial teachers' licenses in 1851. They insured their own continuity by sending six young women to

New York for training in the spirit of Mother Seton. And in 1856, i.e. within seven years of the arrival of the four Sisters, the Halifax foundation became an independent unit separate from New York. This was a high point of the early years.

The separation from the New York Motherhouse was not without precedent, for the New York Sisters had already experienced a similar event. Their Superior General in Emmitsburg was a Father Louis Delual. Now Sisters in New York cared for orphans, boys as well as girls. Father Deluol interpreted Saint Vincent's rule as not allowing the Sisters to take care of boys, hence they should withdraw from New York and return to Emmitsburg. Bishop ,Hughes of New York, not wanting to see the orphans left uncared for, solved the difficulty by offering to create a diocesan community which would be composed of any Sisters of Charity who would make the choice of staying in New York. An agreement was reached with the Emmitsburg Motherhouse. Of the 62 Sisters in New York, 33 remained to do the work. The others returned to Emmitsburg. That was in 1846. In 1849 that little band of New Yorkers spared four of their members to pioneer the Halifax foundation. Setting up an independent unit was not new then to the Halifax Sisters. So it was that Sister Basilia McCann travelled to New York to negotiate the new status for Halifax. She returned in time for the December 8, 1855 Feast of the Immaculate Conception, at which she announced that Saint Mary's was now an independent Motherhouse, and that she was the Mother Superior. Approval from Rome came in February, 1856, from Pius IX.

In 1855 the congregation still numbered only five members. In such a small army, there was plenty of room for promotion. There were four officers and one private. Mother Mary Basilia McCann was Superior; Sister Mary Austin Maloney, Assistant; Sister Mary Ann Connolly, Treasurer; and Sister Mary Rose McAleer, Procuratrix. Sister Mary Alexis Mooney was the only private in the group. Within a year, however, the private had company: nine young ladies joined the community as postulants.

The numbers allowed for expansion and so Sister Mary Rose McAleer and two novices began teaching girls in St. Patrick's Parish in the North end of the city. At first they travelled daily to teach in the church basement. A house was soon rented for them, and thus began St. Patrick's Convent – and High School and Elementary School. St. Patrick's was the first of more than a hundred missions that would eventually be opened by the Sisters of

Charity.

By 1858 there were 14 Sisters – spread around the HalifaxDartmouth area – looking after three schools and a group of orphans. In keeping with the practicability of the Emmitsburg tradition, Mother Mary Rose McAleer, successor to Sister Basilia, had the Sisters of Charity incorporated by the Nova Scotia legislature. When her term of office was over, Mother Mary Rose followed Sister Basilia's example and returned to New York as had been provided for by the 1855 agreement. Her successor, in turn, was the first Halifax born Mother Superior: Mary Josephine Carroll.

In the eighteen sixties Halifax was riding a wave of prosperity occasioned by the American Civil War. The city profited by selling goods to both sides. Archbishop Connolly took advantage of the prosperity to further his educational projects: ten Christian Brothers came to Halifax to teach. Meanwhile, the Sisters opened houses in Bathurst, New Brunswick and in Western Nova Scotia. In 1866 they also confirmed their name, Sisters of Charity. That year victims of cholera were landed from an immigrant ship on McNab's Island in the harbour and when the Archbishop asked for helpers, all the Sisters volunteered. He chose three. The *Acadian Recorder* that spring wrote,

> As everywhere throughout the entire world in times of sorrow, war, and pestilence, the Sisters of Charity have rendered invaluable assistance...

That summer the increase in the number of orphans led to expansion of facilities.

The early years seem to roll on with only expansion and prosperity as hallmarks, but the life of the Sisters, indeed the very existence of the Congregation, was threatened by the rapid expansion. In those days in the Congregation religious formation amounted to apprenticeship. Sisters and novices gave time both to classroom duties and to the supervision of orphans living in their convents (a separate orphanage was not built until 1866). After school hours, they also visited the sick and brought necessities to the poor. Their devotions were carried out in the parish church in what little remained for them. This circumstance, along with the form of government then common to religious congregations of women, combined to bring upon the Sisters the *troubles* of 1877, but not before one more Mother Superior,

Mother Mary Elizabeth O'Neill, made her contribution.

It is a tradition that as a child, Elizabeth O'Neill had hurried down to the pier to witness the arrival of the Sisters in 1849. Twenty-one years later, in 1870, she was elected Mother Superior. During her tenure she purchased the property at Rockingliam on Bedford Basin just outside Halifax, where, by September of 1873, the Sisters moved into the newly built Motherhouse named Mount Saint Vincent. Evidently she had sound business acumen. Four missions were opened in Western Nova Scotia in her term of office and the Sisters continued to receive good reports as teachers in the Halifax school system, both for capability and training.

As far as religious life was concerned, however, spiritual retreats for the members and spiritual conferences from theologians were as yet unknown. Moreover, the Vincentian rule in use contained no restrictions with respect to cloister; hence Mother Elizabeth saw no objections in accepting the aging Bishop's request for several Sisters to come occasionally to his residence and entertain him with piano and violin playing, and even card playing. This kind attention was to have repercussions.

When Archbishop Connolly died he was replaced by Bishop Michael Hannon. That same year Mother Mary Francis Maguire succeeded Elizabeth O'Neill. The cordiality expressed in a first exchange of letters between Hannon and Maguire was not destined to last. Both were strong personalities.

The internal government of congregations of religious women in those days was in the hands of a Mother Superior and a Council elected by the Sisters. However, the Superior General of the Congregation was always a priest, appointed by the Bishop with the approval of the Sisters. His role was supposed to be that of spiritual adviser and guide.

For awhile Bishop Hannon had been Superior General of the Halifax Sisters, before he became bishop, but he had been removed from that office. When he became Bishop he indicated his disaproval of the community. He interfered in school board appointments, attempted to prevent public attendance at Mount St. Vincent closing exercises, and caused other difficulties. Mother Mary Francis ignored, or tried to ignore, his prohibitions. She corrected abuses and made efforts to preserve the religious spirit as well while keeping the internal affairs of the community under community jurisdiction. But members took sides and as a result there was a rift in the small congregation. Some Sisters sided with the Bishop in his efforts to

"restore discipline"; others sided with Mother Mary Francis. It was an extremely trying period – choosing between Bishop and Mother Superior! The affair was settled eventually but only after presentations were made by the Congregation to Rome. On April 30, 1880, Leo XIII issued a document removing from the Archbishop of Halifax "any jurisdiction" he had held over the Sisters of Charity, and placing the Congregation under the Pope's immediate control. Archbishop John Cameron of Arichat was to be the Pope's representative.

The story thus sketchily presented is very intriguing and the lack of documentation renders it so. The Chancery of Halifax has no copies of Bishop Hannon's correspondence. The Archives of Mount Vincent disappeared in the fire of 1951. Where to find documents? A phenomenal job of detective work was done by Sister Francis d'Assisi, the community historian. By searching the archives of various Roman institutions, the Irish College, the Propaganda, the Congregation of Religious, as well as Canadian chanceries, she was able to piece together the story. A key figure outside of the ecclesiastial framework was John Sparrow Thompson, later Prime Minister of Canada, whose sister-in-law, Sister Helena Affleck, was a member of the Congregation. Thompson was the community's legal adviser and was of great assistance in having the congregation's cause heard and settled in Rome. It is only in recent years, with the clarification brought by Sister Francis d'Assisi's research, that the cloud of mystery and unease has been removed from both congregation and diocese. At the time the congregation was wrecked by the departure of twelve of its sixty-two members. The next Mother Superior, Benedicta Harrington, and the newly appointed Superior General, John Cameron of Arichat, worked to bring about a spiritual renewal. Thus, the first eight-day retreats, based on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, were begun, and gradually, a fuller program of spiritual training was introduced.

The troubles of 1877 were not the only distasteful events. There were other instances of misunderstandings: between clergy and the Sisters in Western Nova Scotia; between boards and the Sisters in Cape Breton; and over teacher licensing in New Brunswick. The controversial CBC film "Thecla's Choice" (concerning the Sisters of Saint Martha) touches another area of misunderstanding. In addition, the Sisters suffered physical poverty and hardship in many of the pioneer missions. But perhaps "the troubles" of 1877 were potentially the most dangerous, involving as they did, the

Archbishop of the Diocese where the Motherhouse was situated, and the Mother Superior herself.

Sometimes it is forgotten that the success of religious congregations, their buildings, their numbers, but above all their works – is due to the leadership of great individuals giving their lives to God. It has been the fashion in the past for religious sisters, much to the unhappiness of historians, to play down the roles of individuals whose leadership made possible great works of charity and benevolence around the world. In the presentation of a close-up of a congregation the individual leaders assume their rightful place as key elements in the progress of the work of the Church. Fortunately the biographies of our earlier Mothers Superior have been written.

As our congregation moved into the twentieth century. the strong leadership of Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh had its impact and met with the response that moulded the congregation into readiness for Vatican II.

Mother Berchmans was first elected to the Council in 1884 for five years, then again in 1895; she served as Mother Superior from 1901 and then became the first Mother General in 1908, when the Congregation became a pontifical institute and the role of a priest Superior General disappeared. She remained Mother General until 1926, but even after that was elected assistant to the next General for two more terms. Mother Berchmans served fortythree years in one office or another.

During Mother Berchmans' terms in office the Congregation continued to open new missions and take on new tasks. There was vision, in the education, both spiritual and temporal, given the Sisters to prepare them for the apostolate both current and future. When she became Mother Superior in 1901, Mother Berchmans had already been local superior, school principal and spiritual director in Nova Scotia, Massachusetts, and Ontario, in addition to having been assistant to three Mothers Superior. Her first priority was the spiritual life. Despite her love of Saint Vincent de Paul, and her respect for the virtues of simplicity, charity, and humility which she urged for the Sisters of Charity, Mother Berchmans concurred with the strong contemporary tendency to favour Jesuit spirituality. Jesuit Fathers came to the Mount as retreat directors and lecturers. More basic still was Mother Berchmans's determination that novices complete their two-year novitiate before being missioned. This was to replace the apprenticeship-style of life.

Two priests especially gave Mother Berchmans the encouragement and

assistance she needed in her vision of the community. For years Reverend Elder Mullin, S.J. from Boston, was a familiar figure at the Mount giving retreats and direction to the Sisters and advice and counsel to Mother Berchmans. The other priest was Most Reverend Edward J. McCarthy of the Diocese of Halifax, appointed Superior General in 1906. Within two years, he had worked himself out of the position by the encouragement he gave Mother Berchmans to overcome opposition and seek and obtain special Papal approval for the congregation's rules, constitution and manuals of prayers. In 1908 the Sisters of Charity were made a papal institute, and Mother Berchmans became the first Mother General. The role of Superior General disappeared. The five-year trial period ended on June 10, 1913, with Pius X's final approval of the Constitutions. The spirit of those constitutions has been recaptured in the latest revisions.

If these broad, far-reaching administrative matters were not enough, Mother Berchmans had to contend with very earthy stuff as well: forest fires around the Mount, a water shortage, expropriation of land by the Dominion Government for railroad building; and the Halifax explosion in 1917.

Her foresight was extraordinary. As early as 1915 when doctoral degrees were rare, especially for women, she sent Sisters to the Catholic University of America in Washington so that Mount Saint Vincent could become a College affiliated with Dalhousie University. Sisters also went to Fordham University, Creighton University, and to England to pursue higher studies. The seed of higher education took root. Mount Saint Vincent received its own college charter in 1925. Today Mount Saint Vincent University, the outgrowth of the college, maintains its honorable and unique position as a degree-granting women's university. Mount Saint Vincent, in fact, at one time was a very broad educational umbrella housing an academy, a college, and a provincially licensed normal school. The Sisters were, of course, beneficiaries of what was offered.

When Mother Mary Berchmans assumed her office of Councillor in 1895, there were 23 houses in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Bermuda, and Massachusetts, staffed by about 190 Sisters. By the end of her term of office there were 678 Sisters in 40 missions in Eastern Canada, but also in British Columbia and Alberta. As well, four Sisters returned to New York in 1924 – " a refund for the gift of 75 years before," said Sister Mary Bernard Stuart, the Bursar General.

THE LATER YEARS

As the Congregation moved into the last quarter of its first century, it was still growing. Mother Mary Louise Meahan, elected in 1926, looked first to the physical plant of Mount Saint Vincent: the Motherhouse was expanded to house more adequately the novitiate, the administration, and the college. The Halifax infirmary was built as a public hospital. Then she introduced diversity in apostolic work. Catechetical and social centers were opened and staffed; and in the Canadian West Indian residential schools and hospitals were run by the Sisters.

Mother Louise was succeeded by Mother Mary Evaristus Moran who was 74 years of age when she was elected in 1944. She had been on the council for thirty years, and had specialized as directress of studies for the Sisters. Again, ups and downs marked the end of the congregation's first hundred years. In 1945 Halifax endured the anguish of another explosion. A new college building named Evaristus Hall honored Mother Evaristus who had been the first President of the College. In 1949, the centenary of the Sisters' arrival in Halifax, celebrated and commemorated with pageants and Masses and prayer of praise. Not only was a birthday celebrated and a second century begun, but new calls, new sufferings, and new life styles were in the offing, not only for the congregation, but for the Church at large. Social consciousness, unlabelled as such, motivated individuals as well as the administration of congregations. The large number of women entering religious life allowed administrations to respond corporately to calls from various parts of the Church.

Today, 1980, different times, different manners. Today call and response depend more upon the individual's hearing and answering than ever they did in the previous hundred years.

Thirty years of our second century, have been marked by the same forces for change that altered the whole Church. That part of the story is too close for summary. It requires a more analytical and detached view than this writer can give it at this moment. May God continue to bless us through his religious. May He send people to do His work in religious orders.

SOURCES

Most of the material for this paper is a result of the work of Sisters Margaret FLAHIFF, S.C., Cecilia ROONEY, S.C., and Patricia KEANE, S.C.

The biograhies of the Superiors, and Mothers, have been written and published, as follows:

A Beloved Mother, Mother Mary Basilia McCann, by Sister Francis D'ASSISI, S.C., Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, N.S., 1968.

A Trio of Mothers; Mother Mary Rose McAleer, Mother Mary Josephine Carroll, Mother Mary Elizabeth O'Neill, by Sister Francis D'ASSISI, Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, N.S., 1968.

Two Mothers; Mother M. Francis Maguire, Mother M. Benedicta Harrington, same author, 1971.

A Study in Humility, Mother Mary Cleophas Connors, by Sister Jean de Chantal KENNEDY, Mount Saint Agnes, Bermuda, 1969.

A Far-sighted Mother, Mother Mary Bonaventure, by Sister Maria CONSTANCE, S.C., Mount Saint Vincent, Wellesley Hills, Mass., 1972.

Artist for God, Mother Mary Fidelis Eustace, by Sister Eileen RYAN, S.C., Saint Veronica Convent, Dorval, Quebec, 1972.

An Active Contemplative, Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh, by Sister Maria Berchmans MACINNIS, S.C., Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, N.S., 1971.

The Full Grain, Mother Mary Louise Meahan, by Sister Marguerita ST. CROIX, S.C., Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, N.S., 1973.

A Discerning Mother, Mother Mary Evaristus, by Sister Frances PATRICE, S.C., Saint Joseph Convent, Needham, Mass., (date omitted).

OTHER:

" Rosanna McCann", in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IX, 1976, by Sister Francis D'Assisi.