

The Social Origins and Congregational Identity of the Founding Sisters of St. Martha of Charlottetown, PEI, 1915-1925¹

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Prince Edward Island Roman Catholic church created several successful Catholic social institutions to care for its flock, including a referral hospital, a men's college, and several schools. Poverty, ethnic division, and anti-Catholicism necessitated these social institutions and a particularly long-serving and determined bishop, Peter McIntyre, launched them.² While the rise in social institutions signified real strength in the Catholic population, the diocese had a noticeable weakness. When Henry O'Leary (1879-1938) became bishop of Charlottetown in 1913, there was still no congregation of women religious native to the province. Yearning for a dependable, flexible, skilled, and inexpensive labour pool to carry out his vision for a strong Catholic Prince Edward Island, the young bishop quite naively set out to found a diocesan congregation of women.³ A study of the establishment and evolution of the Sisters of St. Martha of Charlottetown over their first decade, shows how an ambitious bishop's intense desire for an eclectic diocesan congregation was constrained by the limited number and type of religious aspirants on PEI who chose to enter the Marthas rather than other congregations.

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² Heidi MacDonald, "Developing a Strong Roman Catholic Social Order in Late Nineteenth-Century Prince Edward Island," *CCHA Historical Studies*, 69 (2003): 34-51.

³ When O'Leary became bishop in 1913 at age 34, he was the youngest bishop in the British Empire. Grace Savage Cady, "The Bishops O'Leary," *Atlantic Advocate* (April 1983): 51.

Bishop Henry O’Leary expected that the creation of the Congregation would stem the significant out-migration of Island women with religious vocations who, before 1916, had to go off-Island if they wished to join a religious congregation. O’Leary foresaw that the Island would finally benefit from its own female vocations. The bishop’s immediate plan was for the new Congregation to provide domestic service at St. Dunstan’s College and his own residence, but he indicated his intention to expand the Congregation’s work as soon as was possible. He sought both skilled and unskilled aspirants saying, “We desire to obtain recruits for all classes of work, but in particular, teachers and those who would engage in nursing and other kinds of works.”⁴ However, rather than attracting a large number of entrants with skills which could be used in numerous kinds of institutions, the new Congregation drew a small and fairly homogeneous group of primarily Irish-Canadian women, few of whom had completed high school. As a result of the number and nature of entrants, the Congregation was limited to serving in primarily domestic assignments between 1916 and 1924. This situation perpetuated itself in that it was unlikely that women with professional training would be drawn into a congregation engaged in the first instance in domestic service. Thus, it is no surprise that a few hundred Island women in the early twentieth century joined off-Island congregations that engaged in well-established, specialized work, rather than the new Congregation.⁵ By 1924, the twenty-seven members of the Sisters of St. Martha included only one nurse and a few teachers; the remainder had no professional skills and minimal formal education.⁶ Nevertheless, these members proved themselves tenacious and resilient as their work was often extremely strenuous.

⁴ Charlottetown. Sisters of St Martha of Charlottetown Archives [SSMA], Series 8, Sub-series 3, #8, “The Dream of Henry O’Leary,” unpublished booklet, [1991], 5 and 9. When the congregation reconsidered their return to their charism after Vatican II, they reflected on the diversity of work intended by their founder: “Bishop Henry conceived of a Congregation which would be deeply apostolic, rooted in an incarnational theology, and which would penetrate the social milieu in new and different ways.... Clearly and explicitly, breadth of ministry was the core concept on which the founding of the Congregation was based.” SSMA, Series 1, Box 7, Sub-series 7, “Basic Vision of the Founder,” 1.

⁵ Between 1891 and 1929, 85 PEI women joined the Sisters of St Joseph in Minnesota, 119 joined the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal, 20 joined the Sisters of Saint Anne in Quebec, and 16 entered the Sisters of Charity, Halifax. Sixty-five women a decade joined these four Congregations, a significant number from a provincial population in 1921 of less than twenty thousand Roman Catholic women of all ages. See Ellen Mary Cullen, CSM, “Growth and Expansion, 1891-1929,” in Michael Hennessey, ed., *The Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island, 1720-1970* (Charlottetown: Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation, 1979), 118.

⁶ SSMA, Series 9, “Obituaries,” and SSMA, Series 3, Sub-series 4, #4, “Sisters’ Ministries.”

When the Sisters of St. Martha were founded there were already three congregations of women religious active in Prince Edward Island: the Sisters of Notre Dame taught in seven schools beginning in 1858, les Filles de la Charité (Grey Nuns) had administered the Charlottetown Hospital since 1879 and St. Vincent's Orphanage since 1910, and les Petites Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille had been in charge of domestic affairs at St. Dunstan's College since 1908.⁷ These three groups were papal congregations, as opposed to diocesan congregations, and all had their headquarters in Quebec. Their papal status signified they were officially under the control of the Curia, which provided a degree of protection from authoritarian bishops, some of whom sought to build diocesan social services on the labour of religious congregations. Papal congregations were still accountable to the bishops in whose dioceses they served, however, and could ultimately be asked to leave a diocese if they did not have the approval or support of the local bishop. Religious congregations tended to prefer the relative autonomy of papal status. Most bishops, on the other hand, liked the control they had over diocesan congregations.⁸

Bishop Henry O'Leary judged that papal congregations, while valuable, were an insecure and unpredictable foundation on which to further develop the province's Roman Catholic social institutions.⁹ Papal congregations could leave Prince Edward Island at their discretion and were more bound to the spirit and work of their founder than they ever could be to the vision of any Bishop of Charlottetown. O'Leary wanted, "a community which would be purely diocesan to care for diocesan works."¹⁰ Moreover, he explained that, "We would desire that our Sisters remain

⁷ In the case of les Filles de la Charité and les Petites Soeurs, the institutions in which they served were owned by the Diocese of Charlottetown, while the Congregation of Notre Dame institutions were either owned by their Congregation or the local parish.

⁸ Patricia Byrne, "Sisters of St Joseph: The Americanization of a French Tradition," *US Catholic Historian* 5 (3-4): 241-72, 1986 as quoted in Patricia Wittberg, SC, *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 86-89. Nineteenth-century bishops often furthered their careers by founding sisterhoods, although this phenomenon had waned by the twentieth century. Wittberg, 92.

The Sisters of Charity, Halifax are a fine example of a congregation's preference for papal status. See J. Brian Hannington, *Every Popish Person: The Story of Roman Catholicism in Nova Scotia and the Church of Halifax, 1604-1984* (Halifax: Archdiocese of Halifax, 1984), 102,139-149.

⁹ Sister Mary Ida, CSM, "The Birth and Growth of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island," (M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1955), 11.

¹⁰ Letter to Mother Gertrude of the Sisters of the Holy Family, 2 June 1916, in "Dream of Henry O'Leary."

separate, i.e. diocesan, for that is precisely the reason of our endeavouring to begin a branch of some Order.”¹¹

Because PEI had a history of being rich in religious vocations, Bishop Henry O’Leary and his successor and brother, Bishop Louis O’Leary, had reason to be optimistic about the number of women who would enter the new Congregation. Bishop O’Leary rushed to establish the Sisters of St. Martha partly because he was concerned that a Minnesota congregation would obtain aspirants whom the Bishop wanted in his new Congregation. He wrote that, “The Sisters of St. Paul, USA have gathered 8 or 9 subjects up east. It seems to me [we could] ... get some of them.”¹² The American congregation, which recruited annually from PEI parishes,¹³ were far from being the only congregation that O’Leary had to fear. Between 1871 and 1920, 218 PEI women entered the Congregation of Notre Dame (CND) in Montreal, a significantly larger number than from either Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, despite PEI’s much smaller population.¹⁴ Smaller numbers of young PEI women entered other congregations, including the Sisters of Charity (Halifax and Quebec) and the Sisters of Saint Joseph (Boston, Toronto, and Peterborough).¹⁵

¹¹ Bishop O’Leary to Dr MacPherson, Rector, St Francis Xavier University, 27 May 1916, in “Dream of Henry O’Leary.”

¹² SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 2, #6, Bishop Henry O’Leary to Mother Stanislaus, 30 July 1916. O’Leary is referring to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province (Minnesota).

¹³ Father Art O’Shea credits the attraction to this particular Congregation to the exodus of several Island priests to the Minnesota area, the first of whom was James Reardon (1872-1963), a native of Covehead, PEI. Once kinship and community networks developed, there was a significant emigration of PEI women with vocations to Minnesota. Correspondence with Father Art O’Shea, acting archivist, Diocese of Charlottetown, 17 June 1998.

¹⁴ Vautour notes that between 1871 and 1920, 166 PEI women entered as *soeurs de chœur* and 52 as *soeurs converses*. Of the former, 110 went on to make perpetual vows while 39 of the latter made perpetual vows. The total number of entrants from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick during this period was 162 and 144, respectively. Doreen Vautour, “Maritime Entrants to the Congregation of Notre Dame, 1880-1920: A Rise in Vocations,” (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1995), 68.

In the late nineteenth century, several congregations associated with the middle class created a tier of membership called lay sisters (*les soeurs converses*), who performed manual labour for the Congregation and did not participate in the Congregation’s government or recitation of the daily office. Vatican II called for an end to the distinction between choir and lay sisters. Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood, 1840-1920* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 76.

¹⁵ Cullen, “Growth and Expansion,” 118.

Because he was possessive of Island vocations and anxious for the province to benefit from their labour, O’Leary discouraged potential aspirants’ notions about fulfilling a broader mission or having an adventure. As he wrote to the diocesan clergy:

I may say that our diocese is in the greatest need of subjects for various diocesan works and we would urge you to do all in your power to assist us in securing recruits. It would indeed be a strange and incredible event if our Island diocese which has sent so many religious abroad could not obtain a sufficient number for its own needs.¹⁶

Bishop Henry O’Leary’s successor, Bishop Louis O’Leary, also desperately wanted PEI to benefit from its own vocations. In 1921, when speaking to a large group of potential recruits, Catholic teachers, he was even more pointed in his remarks than his predecessor had been:

[O]utside a special vocation most clearly manifest, the duty of a well-regulated charity, beginning at home, should impede you from looking elsewhere to devote yourself to God and His service than in the place He chose for your birth and education. The needs of other places may be great, but they come second to the demands of your own native Diocese and merely human considerations should not sway you from making your choice.¹⁷

Both Bishop Henry and Bishop Louis O’Leary seemed unaware of the numerous considerations an aspirant weighed before committing to a congregation, including familial links and opportunities for education.¹⁸ Out-migration, which was linked to the lagging economy, was very common in PEI and could be viewed as the larger context in which young Catholic women left the province. Emigration from PEI peaked in the mid 1890s at seventeen per cent of the total population, but remains significant even today. The early-twentieth century trend of young Catholic women leaving the Island to enter a religious congregation was consistent with the higher rates of out-migration for women than men, as well as higher rates

¹⁶ SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 2, #6, “Bishop O’Leary to Parish Priests, 5 May 1917.”

¹⁷ Charlottetown. Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlottetown Archives [RCDA], Bishop Louis O’Leary Papers, “The Catholic Teacher: Address to the Catholic Teachers of Prince Edward Island by the Bishop of Charlottetown, Bishop Louis O’Leary, 21 July 1921,” 17.

¹⁸ Marta Danylewycz explained the process of choosing a congregation among entrants to the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal in the period 1840 to 1920: “Rather than abandoning themselves to God’s will by rushing to the closest convent, they reasoned and calculated, determining which community best suited their particular social preferences and personal aspirations.” Danylewycz, 111.

among the young and active.¹⁹ In addition, the reason given for the exodus of young people from PEI and the other Maritime provinces – to seek greater opportunities than were available in their home provinces – was exactly the reason that PEI women with vocations left the province.²⁰ There was no congregation for them to enter on PEI before 1916, and after 1916, many aspirants preferred the opportunities available in congregations off the island rather than O’Leary’s newly created congregation. Once the trend of out-migration was established for women joining religious congregations outside the province, founding one religious congregation on PEI was insufficient to stop the trend.

Further evidence that O’Leary failed to understand the uniqueness of various congregations may be gleaned by his broad appeal to at least five very different congregations for help in establishing the Congregation.²¹ Four refused on the basis that their mission was more professional and specialized than O’Leary desired. The Sisters of St. Martha of Antigonish, however, agreed to the request. Although they had moved into hospital work by 1906, the Antigonish Marthas had been founded in 1894 specifically to provide domestic service.²² The Antigonish Congregation accepted the Charlottetown Congregation’s first aspirants in the Antigonish novitiate in early 1915, and promised that after a year and a half, four Antigonish Sisters would come to Charlottetown to offer further support for the new one and share in the work at St. Dunstan’s. One of the Antigonish Sisters, Sister Stanislaus (Mary Anne MacDonald, 1882-1970) served as the Charlottetown Congregation’s first general superior and must be given credit as cofounder of the Charlottetown Marthas.²³

¹⁹ Patricia Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921,” in P.A. Buckner and David Frank, eds., *Atlantic Canada After Confederation*, 2nd ed., (Fredericton, 1991), 49. Unfortunately, Thornton does not report on the religious affiliation of emigrants.

²⁰ Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal and Kingston, 2000), 35.

²¹ Bishop Henry O’Leary requested help from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province (Minnesota), the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peterborough, the Congregation of Notre Dame, the Hotel Dieu Sisters of Chatham, New Brunswick, and the Sisters of St. Martha of Antigonish. See “Dream of Henry O’Leary”, 4-5.

²² Sarah MacPherson, CSM, “Religious Women in Nova Scotia: A Struggle for Autonomy: A Sketch of the Sisters of St. Martha of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, 1900-1960,” in CCHA *Historical Papers* (1984): 89-106, and James Cameron, *History of the Sisters of St. Martha, Antigonish, Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2000), 53-57.

²³ Cameron, 56-57.

Although O’Leary’s prediction of rapid recruitment proved naive, as the following table illustrates, during their first decade the Sisters of St. Martha did attract fifty-seven women who stayed at least six months.

Table 1: Entrants Per Year, 1915-25²⁴

1915	4
1916	4
1917	9
1918	4
1919	6
1920	5
1921	5
1922	6
1923	8
1924	3
1925	3
Total	57

Fifty-seven entrants over ten years seems a reasonable number given that the total female Catholic population of the Island was only 19,304 in 1921.²⁵ On the other hand, in the decade 1911-1920, eighty-five Island women entered the Congregation of Notre Dame,²⁶ and many others entered numerous other North American congregations. For women religious, early twentieth-century North America was a buyer’s market; women with vocations did not simply join the convent closest to them, as Bishop O’Leary had either assumed or hoped. Thus, the founding of the Sisters of St. Martha had not stopped the out-migration of PEI women with religious vocations. Similarly, many of the women who joined the new Congregation left within a couple of years. In the decade 1916 to 1925, fourteen left the Congregation before completing two years in the novitiate

²⁴ SSMA, Series 10, “Card File of All Applicants.” This number excludes Mother Stanislaus and her three assistants from Antigonish. The Charlottetown Congregation actually attracted more than fifty-seven women, but those who left during the first six months, before they entered the novitiate, are excluded from this study because these records were unavailable due to issues of privacy and confidentiality. The Sisters of St Martha were officially founded in 1916 but four entrants were accepted into the Antigonish Marthas’ novitiate in 1915.

²⁵ Canada, *Census of Canada, 1921*, vol. 1, 571. While this number includes all ages and both married and unmarried Roman Catholic women, the potential pool of aspirants would be much smaller, perhaps under 1000 women.

²⁶ Vautour, 66.

and professing final vows, one died, and one received dispensation from her vows.²⁷

While spiritual motivations were normally paramount in attracting women to the religious life, other considerations led aspirants to choose to fulfil their vocations in a particular congregation and to stay in it. So it was with PEI women with vocations. And so it was that the new diocesan Congregation attracted a particular group, which quickly gave it a distinctive identity, an identity which perpetuated itself by attracting more “like” women. Who, then, did the Bishop’s newly-created Congregation attract?

The average age of the first fifty-seven entrants was twenty-four years.²⁸ This is high compared to other religious congregations – the average age of Maritime entrants to the CND in the 1910s was 21.4²⁹ – but the high average age at entrance is comparable to PEI’s high average age at first marriage. In 1921, the average age at marriage for PEI women was 26.5, the highest in the country. The average age at entrance was high probably for the same reason PEI’s average age at marriage was high: poverty.³⁰ Some potential entrants were needed in the household economy, including one woman who waited until she was thirty-four to enter the Congregation. Her father died when she was young, her three sisters married quite early, and her only brother died in infancy. Despite her strong longing for religious life, she stayed at home to look after her mother, not entering the Congregation until 1920, presumably after her mother’s death.³¹

²⁷ There has not been sufficient research on Canadian women’s religious congregations to determine an average rate of attrition, although the Sisters of St. Martha’s rate seems high. For comparison, in the decade 1911-1920, 71 per cent of entrants to the Congregation of Notre Dame, but only 24.5 per cent of entrants to the Sisters of Misericorde, remained in the respective congregations more than two years. See Marta Danylewycz, “In Their Own Right: Convents, An Organized Expression of Women’s Aspirations,” Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada*, 3rd ed., (Toronto: Oxford, 1991), 185.

²⁸ SSMA, Series 10, “Card File of All Applicants.”

²⁹ Vautour, 92, 98. Calculations are by the author.

³⁰ It is not surprising that PEI, the most impoverished province in Canada, also had the highest age of marriage, as many couples delayed marriage until they could acquire a certain number of goods. Ellen Gee, “Fertility and Marriage Patterns in Canada 1851-1971,” (PhD thesis UBC, 1978), 221, as quoted in Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Markam: Penguin, 1988), 82. Ellen Gee, “Female Marriage Patterns in Canada: Changes and Differentials,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 11:4 (Autumn 1980), 460, as quoted in Alison Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt, 1996), 176.

³¹ SSMA, Series 9, “Sister Mary Michael McKenna, Obituary.”

What is more telling than the average age of entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha between 1916 and 1924, however, is the wide range of age at entry, which is illustrated by the following table.

Table 2: Age of Entrants, 1915-1925, in Per Cent

Years	15-17	18-20	21-23	24-26	27-29	30+	not known	Total
1915-20	15.6 (5)	12.5 (4)	12.5 (4)	18.8 (6)	9.4 (3)	25.0 (8)	6.3 (2)	100.1 (32)
1921-25	0 (11)	44.0 (4)	16.0 (5)	20.0 (4)	16.0 (4)	4.0 (1)	0	100 (25)
1915-25	8.8 (5)	26.3 (15)	14.0 (8)	19.3 (11)	12.3 (7)	15.8 (9)	3.5 (2)	100 (57)

Source: "Card File of All Applicants," SSMA, Series 10.

Although the majority of entrants were between eighteen and twenty-six years old, the age range is much wider than this would seem to imply. For example, two fifteen-year-olds entered in 1917 and two siblings in their mid-40s entered in 1919.

The entrance of younger women, particularly those less than eighteen years, is more difficult to explain than the entrance of women in their mid-twenties and older. Before 1918, five women entered the Sisters of St. Martha before their eighteenth birthday but no one less than eighteen years entered during the remainder of the decade. Canon law stipulated that first profession could not be made before the age of eighteen. The Sisters of St. Martha required successful aspirants to spend six months in the postulancy and twelve months in the novitiate (with a possible three-month extension to the latter),³² so it seems illogical that they would accept an aspirant less than sixteen and a half years of age because she would be too young to make first vows upon completion of her novitiate. Not surprisingly, the practice of receiving women less than sixteen seems to have been discontinued after 1917, which was the peak year for entrants. That such young women were received before 1917 suggests that the Bishop may have been worried about a dearth of recruits. Although the Congregation's first Constitutions, written by Bishop Louis O'Leary in 1921, stipulated

³² SSMA, Series 6, "1921 Constitutions," articles 17 and 25.

that entrants should be between sixteen and thirty, exceptions continued to be made.³³

The wide range of age of entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha might seem to imply an eclectic congregation, but this was undoubtedly the most disparate aspect of their membership. An analysis of entrants' ethnicities, levels of education, skills, and socioeconomic backgrounds reveals far greater homogeneity.

The ethnicity of the early entrants did not reflect the diverse ethnic composition of the Roman Catholic population of PEI. In 1931, the ethnic descent of the Island population was composed of 37 per cent Scots, 26.6 per cent English, 20 per cent Irish, and 14.7 per cent Acadians. Among Roman Catholics, however, the Irish comprised approximately 39 per cent, the French 33 per cent, the Scots 21 per cent, and the English just 6 per cent.³⁴ Yet, although only two out of five Island Catholics were Irish, they provided the overwhelming majority of entrants to the Marthas.

Table 3: Ethnic Descent of Sisters of St. Martha Entrants, 1915-25, in Per Cent³⁵

Year of Entrance	Irish	Scots	French	English	Not known	Total
1916-20	81.3 (26)	9.4 (3)	6.3 (2)	0	3.1 (1)	100.1 (32)
1921-25	72 (18)	8 (2)	20 (5)	0	0	100 (25)
1915-25	77.2 (44)	8.8 (5)	12.3 (7)	0	1.8 (1)	100.1 (57)

Source: SSMA, Series 10, "Card File of All Applicants."

³³ SSMA, Series 6, "1921 Constitutions," chapter 3, article 5, #3. In 1921, the Bishop made another exception to entrance requirements by accepting a woman who had been widowed the same year. SSMA, Series 9, "Sister Margaret Ann Richard, Obituary."

³⁴ Ethnicity figures for 1931 were used because that is the first year that ethnicity is cross referenced with religion in the *Census*. 1921 ethnicity statistics are only slightly different: 37 per cent Scots, 26 per cent English, 21 per cent Irish, and 13 per cent Acadian. *Census of Canada*, 1921 and 1931.

³⁵ In the first five years there were no cases of 'mixed' parentage. In the second five years there were four cases of Irish fathers and Acadian mothers that have been counted as Irish. It is possible, of course, that a mother's ethnic influence may have been more significant than a father's.

The disproportionate number of Irish among the entrants of the Sisters of St. Martha may be partly explained by the founder's ethnicity and Irish dominance in the administration of the Congregation. The Irish-Canadian ethnicity of Henry O'Leary, the founder of the Sisters of St. Martha, may have led some Irish families to encourage their daughters to join the new Congregation. O'Leary was the first bishop of Charlottetown who was not of Scottish descent. The diocese he inherited had been largely shaped by Bishop Peter McIntyre (1818-1891), a "proud Scot" whose episcopate lasted thirty years.³⁶ Self-consciously pro-Irish, Bishop O'Leary undoubtedly increased pride among Irish Islanders, and this surely encouraged some Irish Catholics to support their bishop's new Congregation.

Once the first few women entered with surnames which included Power, Murray, McQuaid, Monaghan, and Kenny, prospective recruits inevitably identified the Congregation as Irish, a trend solidified by the Congregation's administration. The first elected superior-general of the Charlottetown Marthas, Mother Frances Loyola (Ellen Mary Cullen, 1898-1994), was of Irish descent. The elected councillors who joined her in 1922, were Sisters M. Clare (Teresa Murray), aged thirty-five, from Lot 65; M. Paula (Ellen McPhee), aged thirty, from Georgetown; M. St. John (Sarah Farrell), aged twenty-three, from Sturgeon; and M. Faustina (Rose Ella Monaghan), aged twenty-nine, from Kelly's Cross. All five members of the governing council were of Irish descent and were from predominantly Irish communities. As these women governed the Congregation, developed its goals, and managed its daily affairs, they inevitably imposed an Irish culture upon the Congregation which must have been identifiable to prospective postulants and the Diocese at large.³⁷

The appeal of the Sisters of St. Martha to one particular ethnic culture was not unusual. The creation of internal convent culture was based not only on the intentions and charism of the founder and the demands of the Constitutions, but also on entrants' ethnic and linguistic traditions. An unsuccessful blending of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds could cause much distress in a congregation, as was the case with the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (Saint John) who were comprised of 63 per cent Irish and 31 per cent Acadians.³⁸ After arguing for years that Acadian

³⁶ G. Edward MacDonald, "Peter McIntyre," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol XXII, 637-640, and Wendell MacIntyre, "The Longest Reign," in Hennessey, 71-102.

³⁷ Many congregations chose a Mistress of Novices and a Treasurer to be on the general council, but the Sisters of St. Martha have always had only five members on their general council.

³⁸ Elizabeth McGahan, "The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception: A Canadian Case Study," *CCHA Historical Studies*, 61 (1995): 110. These percentages refer to the period 1854-1897. This tension mirrored strong ethnic divisions in the Roman Catholic population of New Brunswick. Leon Theriault, "L'acadianization de l'Eglise catholique en Acadie, 1763-1953," in Jean Daigle, (ed.), *Les Acadians des maritimes*, (Moncton, 1980), 305-14, 359, as quoted in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto:

Sisters should be more prominent in the convent administration, fifty-three Acadians left the Sisters of Charity in 1924, reducing the number of Sisters in the Congregation by one quarter. The Acadian Sisters formed their own separate community, and convents in French-speaking areas were formally ceded to the new Congregation. Other congregations, such as the Sisters of St. Martha of Charlottetown, quickly developed an internal culture based on ethnic domination without suffering a similar conflict or separation.

Irish Canadian women may have also been particularly attracted to the Sisters of St. Martha because of their historically higher rate of poverty. In PEI, as in other colonies, the best farmland had been settled first. The Irish, however, were among the last to come to Prince Edward Island. In particular, Irish immigrants from Southeast Ireland came to PEI with few or no resources and improved their socio-economic standing very slowly.³⁹ Next to the Acadians who had trickled back to PEI after the 1755 deportation and who were the most impoverished and marginalised of Island ethnic groups, the Irish were the second most cash-poor ethnic group. The newly established Congregation offered a particular advantage for cash-strapped families. As a rule, families of women religious were required to cover the costs of their daughters' travel home for visits. As a result, the Sisters of St. Martha were far more affordable than an off-Island congregation for many Island families. Furthermore, many congregations requested substantial dowries in the early twentieth century, including the CND who requested \$500.⁴⁰ While most congregations were willing to accept women whose families could not afford the asking price of the dowry, the embarrassment of negotiating a lower price would have deterred proud

University of Toronto Press, 1994), 146, 285, and footnote 51, 544.

³⁹ A.H.Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 91.

⁴⁰ “1921 Constitutions,” article 8. A dowry was not meant to be spent during the lifetime of the particular sister who brought it, in the theory that if she left, she would get it back and thus it would be available throughout her life for this purpose. The dowry for entering the *soeurs de choeur* of the Congregation of Notre Dame in the early twentieth century was \$500, a very substantial amount to Island families, most of whom were dependent on farming or fishing for their incomes. Some women were sponsored by wealthier relatives or members of the community. E-mail correspondence with Sister Florence Bertrand, archivist of the CND, Montreal, 26 June 2003. The dowry for the Minnesota Congregation that so many PEI women joined, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province, was \$100 for most of the twentieth century, although entrants who could not afford to pay were accepted. E-mail correspondence with Sister Mary Kraft, archivist of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Minnesota, 20 February 2001.

The argument that because of their poverty the Irish were particularly drawn to the Sisters of St. Martha should apply to Acadian women who were more impoverished and marginalised than the Irish, but understandably, most Acadian women preferred to join one of the many French-speaking congregations.

families, who preferred instead to approach a congregation such as the Sisters of St. Martha, which did not request a dowry.

It seems that the majority of entrants came from cash poor families, which is logical given that PEI was the most impoverished province until Newfoundland entered Confederation in 1949. Available biographical data on entrants does not include fathers' occupations, but obituaries suggest many entrants' socioeconomic backgrounds, and census records flesh out other material. As with education, a father's occupation or the family's social class are noted in the obituaries only when the sister's background was considered exceptional. The occupations noted specifically in the obituaries are ship's captain ("mariner" on the census) and stationmaster. The 1901 Census lists many of the early entrants' fathers as farmers or fishers. Given the range of prosperity within the agricultural class, daughters of farmers, who comprised a majority of entrants, are difficult to classify. Yet the obituaries provide some clues, hinting delicately at class. For example, one sister was praised because the "Vow of Poverty required great sacrifices from her, not that she ever wanted much for herself, but she loved to give and was used to giving to others in all her early years." The same sister was remembered for making a definite contribution to the Congregation by teaching etiquette and setting high standards in the art of food service, an important phase of community work.⁴¹ Another 'well-bred' sister's elegant circumstances in earlier years are implied: "From her cultured Island home Sister brought to the Novitiate that dignity of bearing and gentleness of manner that characterized her during the whole of her religious life."⁴² These two sisters are remembered in their obituaries as exceptional. The vast majority of entrants were from impoverished families which could ill afford the luxury of middle class manners and culture.

Records of the skills or education entrants brought to the Sisters of St. Martha are not available, but again, obituaries suggest a great deal. Biographical data contained in obituaries emphasized a sister's educational attainments. If a woman entered the Congregation with an education above the grade nine level offered in district schools, it was usually noted in her obituary. Obituaries of five of the twenty-eight Sisters who entered between 1916 and 1925 and who stayed permanently, mention attendance at Prince of Wales College and district school teaching for between one and five years before entrance.⁴³ Among this twenty-eight at least, probably only one other had received even a grade ten education. We know that before the Sisters were required to take over the Charlottetown Hospital in 1924, only one of their twenty-seven active members had any medical training; and she went to nursing school after joining the Congregation.

⁴¹ SSMA Series 9, "Sister Mary Michael McKenna (1886-1955), Obituary."

⁴² SSMA, Series 9, "Sister Mary Joseph Montigny (1889-1960), Obituary."

⁴³ The twenty-eight obituaries are for people who died before 1994, and who died while still members of the Congregation. Admittedly six of twenty-eight women, or 21.4 per cent, is higher than the rate of college education among PEI women in the early twentieth century generally, but the majority of these women likely attended the high school that Prince of Wales College also operated.

Only a few obituaries mentioned former employment other than teaching. One woman worked for a few years in Lawrence, Massachusetts, likely in a factory or as a domestic,⁴⁴ another entrant worked in Baltimore with an aunt who was reported to be a successful business woman,⁴⁵ and a “pair” of entrants from western PEI were employed as domestics in Charlottetown.⁴⁶ Despite their “mature” average age at entrance, women did not bring a wide variety of education, professional skills, or employment experience to the Sisters of St. Martha.

It is clear that many early entrants for whom we have obituaries lived lives of domestic service both before and after becoming Sisters of St. Martha. At least a third are remembered for their domestic skills: cooking, cleanliness, endurance for physical work, serving dainty meals, or, as one obituary noted, excellence in decorating cakes. Had these women trained in teaching or nursing, they would have been employed in one of the Congregation’s schools or hospitals as long as their health permitted. It is more likely that these women arrived without an education, and, unless noted otherwise, never received one in the convent. (This is in contrast to the period 1924 to 1939, during which approximately half of the members of the Congregation received training in health care, administration, and education.) One of the first entrants, Sister M. St. John (Sarah Farrell), spent a total of thirty-nine of her sixty-two professed years in domestic service at St. Dunstan’s University, which accounts for virtually all of her adult working life.⁴⁷

Proximity influenced many aspirants to enter the Sisters of St. Martha. Fifty-five of these first fifty-seven entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha were from Prince Edward Island.⁴⁸ This is not surprising given that the bishop assured Islanders that the new Congregation would serve the province exclusively.⁴⁹ Several entrants joined the Sisters of St. Martha specifically because it did not require leaving their home province. The first elected Mother General, Mother Frances Loyola (Ellen Mary Cullen) joined the Island Congregation partly because her father had such a great love of the Island that she wished to remain in the province.⁵⁰ At least three early

⁴⁴ SSMA, Series 9, “Sister Margaret Mary Cassie (1892-1980), Obituary.”

⁴⁵ SSMA, Series 9, “Sister Eileen Gertrude McPhee (1892-1982), Obituary.”

⁴⁶ SSMA, Series 9, “Sister Margaret Chaisson (1903-1983), Obituary” and “Sister Marie Melanie LeClair (1903-1975), Obituary.”

⁴⁷ Sister M. St. John’s (1895-1977) duties at St. Dunstan’s included being sacristan and infirmarian in addition to more standard domestic service before her retirement in 1963. SSMA, Series 9, “Sister M. St. John, Obituary.”

⁴⁸ The only two entrants from outside PEI were from the Magdalen Islands, which was part of the Diocese of Charlottetown from 1829 to 1946.

⁴⁹ SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 2, #6, Bishop Henry O’Leary to Diocesan Parish Priests, 5 May 1917.

⁵⁰ SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 1, #5, Sister Mary Walker, “Sister Ellen Mary Cullen: First General Superior of the Sisters of St. Martha of PEI,” (University of Prince Edward Island undergraduate paper, 1977), 5. Sister Cullen’s mother died six weeks after she entered the Sisters of St. Martha, so Cullen may have been keen

entrants had first entered other Congregations, one the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul (Minnesota) and two the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal, but left because of unhappiness or illness. For these women, the Sisters of St. Martha's proximity to their families provided the opportunity to reenter religious life.⁵¹

Geographically, entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha loosely reflected the Catholic population's distribution in the province. Kings County, with 26 per cent of the Island's Catholics, sent thirteen women or 24 per cent of entrants in the first decade; Prince County with 39.5 per cent of PEI Roman Catholics sent seventeen women or 32 per cent, while Queens with 34.4 per cent of the Island's Catholic population sent forty-three per cent of entrants between 1916 and 1925. More noticeable is that clusters of women entered from a few parishes, indicating either the influence of parish priests who supported Bishop O'Leary's Congregation or the influence of kinship and neighbourhood networks. As in Quebec, PEI women were more likely to join congregations to which relatives already belonged.⁵² Among the first fifty-seven entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha, there were four pairs of sisters while another family sent three siblings. In other words, 20 per cent of members had a sibling in the Congregation. In three cases two siblings entered the same year and in three cases either the second or third sibling entered within the next two years. Other clusters of geographic origin represent women from the same parish who may have been more comfortable joining convents to which other members of their parishes already belonged, or who may have been particularly encouraged by parish priests who strongly supported the new Congregation.

The same phenomenon of kinship and community ties that drew some women to the Sisters of St. Martha encouraged others to enter off-Island congregations. Prospective postulants in the early twentieth century who left PEI often joined more established congregations to which relatives or friends already belonged.⁵³ These entrants valued such connections more than the opportunity to stay on PEI. Yet those who joined the Sisters of St. Martha were not choosing the easy road, or certain security. At the time of its founding and for some years after, the long term success of the new Island Congregation was far from certain.

In July 1916, the first four Sisters of St. Martha of Charlottetown, four PEI women who received their initial religious formation in the Antigonish Marthas' novitiate, returned to PEI with four more experienced Antigonish

to remain near her family.

⁵¹ SSMA, Series 9, "Sister M. Bonaventure Cahill (1888-1981), Obituary" and "Sister M. Catherine Byrne (1887-1982), Obituary."

⁵² Danylewycz, 111-116.

⁵³ Thirty per cent of PEI entrants to the Congregation of Notre Dame between 1880 and 1920 had a relative already in the Congregation. Vautour, 132. My suspicion is that the percentage was even higher among Island entrants to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul (Minnesota). Because Minnesota is farther from PEI than Montreal, aspirants may have needed a stronger magnet, which family links may have provided.

Sisters of St. Martha, including Mother Stanislaus, to form the nucleus of Bishop O’Leary’s new Congregation. While Bishop O’Leary’s goal for the new Congregation was broadly defined – to serve the Diocese of Charlottetown – his immediate plan in 1916 was quite specific: the Sisters were to perform domestic service at St. Dunstan’s University and at his own residence, known as the Bishop’s Palace. St. Dunstan’s, originally founded as St. Andrew’s College in 1831, was a Catholic men’s college that emphasized preparing young men for the seminary and the priesthood. Bishop after bishop considered St. Dunstan’s the province’s most important Catholic institution, and Bishop Henry O’Leary was no exception.⁵⁴ Although a Quebec Congregation, les Petites Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille, had been administering the domestic affairs at the college since 1909, they had indicated their preference to serve in a French-speaking institution. Within weeks of founding the Sisters of St. Martha, Bishop O’Leary told les Petites Soeurs that their services were no longer required, and they left St. Dunstan’s immediately.⁵⁵

The newly created Congregation thus began their work at St. Dunstan’s during World War I, when the annual enrolment was between 120 and 150 students. The post-War influx of students soon increased enrolment to 292 in 1919-20 and raised the college’s domestic demands beyond what the Sisters could reasonably manage.⁵⁶ The Sisters were responsible for all students’ and staff’s meals and laundry, cleaning the buildings, preparing the sacristy and chapel for services, and running a farm owned by the college. The Sisters also cleaned the residents’ rooms, repaired clothing and, during their recreation time, even darned the men’s socks. Their day began at 4:45 a.m. with devotions and then breakfast preparation, and they sometimes worked in the laundry until midnight or 1:00 a.m. The work was particularly labourious because the college did not own institutional equipment.⁵⁷ The young Congregation also staffed the college infirmary, which required a great deal physically and emotionally from the Sisters, particularly when an epidemic ran through the men’s residence as it did during the influenza outbreaks of 1918 and 1920. During the 1920 epidemic, ninety students were ill at one time.⁵⁸

While domestic work at St. Dunstan’s remained the Sisters’ chief endeavour in their first decade, the young Congregation accepted two new assignments in the early 1920s. Three Sisters were sent to a district school

⁵⁴ G. Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan’s University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown: Board of Governors of St. Dunstan’s University and PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1989), 254. Priority was placed on the diocesan seminary because it fostered vocations.

⁵⁵ MacDonald, *St. Dunstan’s*, 265.

⁵⁶ MacDonald, *St. Dunstan’s*, 275.

⁵⁷ SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 1, Ellen Mary Cullen, CSM, “A History of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island,” vol 1 (Charlottetown, 1988), 19-20, and SSMA, Series 12, Box 11, #8, Sister M. Rita Kinch, transcribed oral interview, 1979.

⁵⁸ SSMA, Series 8, Sub-series 4, “Annals,” February 1920.

in Kinkora in 1921, and three Sisters began work at St. Francis Hostel, a Charlottetown home for elderly women, in 1923.

Sisters John Baptista (Driscoll) and Mary Alfred (Laura Mullally, 1893-1926), who both held first class teachers' licences before entering the Congregation, were sent to teach in the two room school in Kinkora, while Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart served as their housekeeper.⁵⁹ Sister Mary Alfred, who was also the principal, taught thirty-eight students in the crowded "senior room" and Sister John Baptista taught thirty-nine students in the "junior room."⁶⁰ Very little information is available on the pioneer Sisters sent to Kinkora largely because none remained in the Congregation more than five years after beginning work; one sister left before making final vows, one received a dispensation from the Congregation in 1926, and the third died of tuberculosis that same year.⁶¹ Although the loss of these three Sisters may have been unrelated to their experience in Kinkora, Sister M. Rita Kinch later recalled that Sister John Baptista had to be replaced in Kinkora because she was exhausted from teaching and "she just gave out."⁶² Sister John Baptista's efforts, nevertheless, had been recognized by her school inspector who named her to a list of ten teachers "of primary and two-room schools who have shown excellent progress or have done good work under difficulties."⁶³ Given that the three Sisters upon whom the burden of this new responsibility fell had only entered the Congregation between 1916 and 1918, had spent much of the three to five years before going to Kinkora working in very strenuous domestic service at St. Dunstan's, and then had only two weeks to prepare for their first year there, it is not surprising that their first year in Kinkora proved more than they could comfortably bear. Even though ensuing sister-teachers had a more satisfactory experience in Kinkora, and even though the school expanded

⁵⁹ The Sisters were given two weeks notice before taking up the work on 16 August 1921. On 27 June 1921, Bishop Henry O'Leary and the rector of St. Malachy's Parish, Kinkora, Right Reverend Maurice MacDonald, received the agreement of both the district ratepayers and the provincial Department of Education to pay the sister-teachers' salaries. The precedent of paying sisters to teach in rural district schools had been set by the CND who staffed schools in Miscouche (1864), Tignish (1868), Souris (1881), and South Rustico (1882). Mary Jeanette Coady, CSM, "The Birth and Growth of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island," (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 1955), 30-31, and Cullen, vol 1, 38-39.

⁶⁰ Prince Edward Island, *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent of Education of the Province of Prince Edward Island for the Year Ending December 31st, 1921*, "Report of School Inspectors," Inspectorate #2, R. Brewer Auld, Inspector, 31 January 1922.

⁶¹ SSMA, Series 3, Sub-series 4, #4, "Work Assignments, 1916-1924 as remembered by Sister M Rita Kinch," and SSMA, Series 12, Box 11, #8, transcribed oral interview, Sister Ellen Mary, 7.

⁶² SSMA, Series 12, Box 11, #8, Sister M. Rita Kinch, transcribed oral interview, 1979.

⁶³ "Report of School Inspectors," Inspectorate #2, 31 January 1922.

and more Sisters joined the staff, it may be telling that the Congregation did not accept an additional teaching assignment for two more decades.⁶⁴ Although Mother Ellen Mary Cullen had three years experience as a district school teacher before entering the Congregation and would have been aware of the demands of teaching,⁶⁵ Bishop O’Leary may have been so determined to expand the Congregation that he overlooked the potential strain on the sisters.

The second new assignment which the Sisters of St. Martha accepted in their first decade was the management of St. Francis Hostel, a home for the elderly that housed twelve women when the Sisters took charge of it in 1923.⁶⁶ The first three Sisters sent to St. Francis Hostel were Sisters M. Faustina (Rose Ella Monaghan, 1893-1973), Thomas Aquinas (Catherine Haughey, 1886-1972), and Anna Marie (Olive O’Rourke, 1893-1974). All three were among the senior Sisters when assigned to the hostel. Of the three, only Sister Faustina had an education beyond grade ten; she had spent several years teaching in Island schools before entering the Congregation in 1917, and then, in 1921, had been sent to nursing school at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia.⁶⁷ In fact, she was the only member of the Congregation who had medical training before 1925. The member of the Congregation with the most formal education and experience, Sister Faustina stayed at the hostel only one year. In contrast, Sisters Thomas Aquinas and Anna Marie had not been educated beyond district schools. The short duration of Sister Faustina’s assignment to the hostel suggests that neither the Bishop nor the Sisters believed that the residents would require anything beyond basic nursing skills which could be learned on the job. In fact, the Sisters’ assignment at St. Francis Hostel is consistent with their domestic service at St. Dunstan’s. Indeed, Sisters Thomas Aquinas and Anna Marie were remembered in their obituaries for skills in domestic service: “Sister [Thomas Aquinas] was a skilful and artistic cook and in the spirit of St. Martha served the hungry with loving joy”⁶⁸ and “[Sister Anna Marie] had high standards in the science of housekeeping … her greatest pleasure was to be doing something for others.”⁶⁹

Bishop O’Leary had publically stated his intention for the Sisters of St. Martha to serve PEI’s 40,000 Catholics in a myriad of ways. That intention seems unrealistic, or at best idealized, given that only a small number of women entered, few of whom had professional qualifications, and the

⁶⁴ The Sisters of St. Martha accepted a teaching assignment in Tracadie Cross in 1942. Coady, 57.

⁶⁵ Walker, 4-6.

⁶⁶ Coady, 38a.

⁶⁷ St. Joseph’s had been administered by the Sisters of St. Martha of Antigonish since 1915. The Charlottetown congregation sent several Sisters to train at their nursing school because of previous ties with the Antigonish Sisters. Cameron 57-58.

⁶⁸ SSMA , Series 9, “Sister Anna Marie O’Rourke (1892-1974), Obituary.”

⁶⁹ SSMA, Series 9, “Sister Thomas Aquinas Haughey (1886-1972), Obituary.”

Congregation's first assignment was in domestic service. Potential aspirants had many congregations from which to choose and clearly many chose more professional congregations than the Sisters of St. Martha. Entrants to the Sisters of St. Martha did not include a large and eclectic cross-section of PEI women, as O'Leary had hoped, but rather a relatively small and homogeneous group of fifty-seven women who were almost 80 per cent Irish, 97 per cent native Islanders, largely unskilled and uneducated, and from cash strapped families. Because a limited number of women entered the Congregation and had few skills and little education, and both the Congregation and Diocese were too poor to formally educate them,⁷⁰ from 1916 to 1925 the Sisters' work largely consisted of domestic service at the diocesan seminary, the bishop's residence, and a home for elderly women. The exception was a small school at which two Sisters taught, beginning in 1921.

Indeed, by the end of the first decade it seemed that everyone but Bishop Louis O'Leary had forgotten the original vision: that the Congregation was founded to serve the Island Catholic population in a variety of ways. But that original vision, subverted for a time, would be reasserted in the second generation, in response to the realization of Bishop Henry O'Leary's early fears. When the les Filles de la Charité exercised their rights, conferred on them by their papal status, and informed Bishop O'Leary that they were returning to Quebec in 1925, the bishop saw no other option than for the Sisters of St. Martha to assume their work. The remarkable thing was not that the bishop expected this recently established community primarily engaged in domestic service to transform itself into a congregation of professional healthcare providers, but that it succeeded in doing so. The tiny core of twenty-seven fully professed members of the Sisters of St. Martha rose to their bishop's Herculean challenge, overcoming a dearth of funding and medical training to administer successfully the Charlottetown Hospital, an eighty-bed referral hospital owned by the diocese.

⁷⁰ The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Saint John, was another primarily Irish Congregation whose entrants usually received their educations after joining the Congregation. Even in the 1950s the general superior noted that many entrants did not have a high school education. McGahan, 132. The Sisters of St. Joseph of the Archdiocese of Toronto, on the other hand, were predominantly Irish, but usually required that entrants who wished to teach or nurse enter with the proper qualifications. See Elizabeth Smyth, "Congregavit Nos in Unum Christi Amor: The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the Archdiocese of Toronto, 1851-1920," *Ontario History*, 84, vol.3 (1992): 230-33.