

CO. DOWN

The Sisters of Mercy's association with Co. Down began on the 26 June 1855 when five Sisters arrived in Newry from the Convent of Mercy, Kinsale, Co. Cork. They were invited by Dr. Michael Blake to found a convent and took up residence in what was known as Ogle's Big House in Canal Street, Newry, which had been purchased for them as a temporary convent.

Newry at the time was divided into two groups: a small prosperous elite with a thriving social life and the vast majority of the population who were poor, surviving in squalid conditions in overcrowded dwellings in the back lanes. From their arrival, the Sisters immediately began visitation of the poor and sick in their own homes. They immediately set up a House of Mercy for destitute and vulnerable women. The same year, 1855, they set up a public laundry for girls and young women to help them support themselves and their families. An industrial school was opened the same year, called the Sewing School, to differentiate it from the government industrial schools. This evolved in 1858 into The Sewing and Lace School which became quite famous for the excellence of its work which was sold in the United Kingdom – Queen Victoria was one of its notable customers – America and Australia. The work executed in this school also won prizes at the Dublin Industrial Exhibition (1882), the Industrial Exhibition in Cork (1883), the World Columbus Exhibition in Chicago (1893) and the Dublin Exhibition in 1897.

In 1858 the Honourable Mrs. Ross of Bladensburg asked the Sisters to take over the care of the children in the orphanage under her patronage in Rostrevor. As a result, twelve little Catholic children were brought to the Sisters in Newry and thus the Mercy Orphanage in Canal Street was established. By 1860 the temporary convent proved to be too small due to the increasing numbers of Sisters and when the community relocated to Catherine Street, the House of Mercy and the Orphanage moved into the old convent.

Societies were quickly established to help the plight of the poor: St. Joseph's Society (December 1859), The Ladies' Clothing Society (December 1862) and the Sodality of Our Lady (December 1864), all designed to help the poor both spiritually and materially.

While the Sisters believed very strongly in the value of education, Dr. Blake considered the schools attached to the Convent of the Poor Clares sufficient for the education of the poor of the town and would not allow the Sisters of Mercy to have schools except for girls over 12 years. So, the Sisters opened a night school for girls and women working in the mills in May 1865. From May 1867 the Sisters were allowed to visit the Newry Workhouse and, subsequently, from January 1903 until October 1904, three Sisters worked in the Infirmary there. They later set up, with the approval of Dr. J. P. Leahy (Dr. Blake's successor), a national school in Canal Street, Newry on 24 May 1869, a primary school for infant boys in 1876 and an intermediate school on 21 November 1887, which eventually evolved into Our Lady's Grammar School. At the request of Dr. Edward Mulhern, bishop of Dromore, a boarding school was set up on 21 November 1918 to cater for those in the surrounding districts who had no means of travelling into Newry. This boarding school soon proved to be too small and moved to the former Great Northern Hotel in Warrenpoint (1923 – 1930). The boarding school returned, on the instruction of the bishop, to Newry where it continued until 1974.

As life became more difficult for the poor of Newry, a Dining Hall was opened on 10 October 1932 to supply the starving men and women of the town with at least one good meal a day which, owing to the lack of employment, they could not otherwise procure. The numbers availing of this opportunity soon ran into hundreds. The Sisters also worked in St. Colman's College, Newry from 1936 – 1944 and again in the late 1990s.

On 27 August 1879 the Sisters took charge of a spacious house and garden purchased by Mr. Thomas Fegan for the 'respectable destitute females of the town', thus enabling poor people to be kept out of the workhouse. Some of the children in the Orphanage in Canal Street were transferred to a floor in this building. This house was renovated and modernised down through the years in the 1970s and a complete renovation took place when a new purpose-built Home for the children, Orana, was built nearby. The newly renovated Our Lady of Mercy Home was opened on 6 October 1983 and had provision for married couples. It got dual registration in 1986 for nursing and residential care and,

since 2001, is under the management of Mercy Care, a company limited by guarantee under the trusteeship of the Sisters of Mercy.

The work of the Sisters, however was not confined to Newry alone. On 2 July 1883 the Sisters moved to Bessbrook at the request of Fr. Charles Quinn with the intention of providing education for the children there. They had been given a farmhouse and farm by Mr. Patrick McKeown, father of the novice, Sr. Michael McKeown. However, owing to a court ruling in the Four Courts, Dublin that day, regarding Mr. McKeown's right to give the holding for a school, the Sisters had to close their school that day. However, five Sisters eventually went to Bessbrook on 2 May 1889 and stayed there. For some months they confined themselves to visiting the sick and conducting a night school for adults and girls working in the Bessbrook Linen Mill. They then opened a school for girls and younger boys and continued a night school for adults. In 1904 a new convent was built and in 1910 a new, spacious school was opened in the grounds adjoining the convent. The house which had formerly been the convent was then used as a boarding school for primary school students and also provided accommodation for retired ladies (St. Michael's) under the care of the Sisters. In 1940 the number of boarders (20-25) was augmented by evacuees from Belfast whom the Sisters educated and kept free gratis. In 1973 a new school, St. Joseph's, was opened for the amalgamated Convent Girls' School and St. Malachy's Boys' schools. Sisters were involved there until 1997.

In 1956, at the request of Cardinal Conway, the overflow of orphans from Nazareth House, Belfast was taken by the Sisters. The Cardinal donated £20 annually towards the upkeep of the children. There was no government funding but it was visited regularly by the appropriate authorities. The boarding school, orphanage and St. Michael's Home were closed in 1983. The building was demolished in 1988 and Avila Nursing Home, a home for elderly women and men, now under the auspices of Mercy Care, was built on the site.

Nowadays, the Sisters are involved in visitation of the elderly and sick of the parish, in reading recovery, in Cuan Mhuire (a refuge for those suffering from addictions), pastoral care in the nursing home and as parish Sisters. One Sister is also involved in missionary work in Lagos.

On 20 August 1864 Rev. Bernard Mooney, parish priest of Rostrevor, requested that a convent be founded in Rostrevor. This was realised on 9 June 1865 when four Sisters took up residence in the parish house, which the parish priest vacated until a new convent could be built. Bearing in mind Mother McAuley's axiom 'to fit children for earth without unfitting them for heaven', they immediately opened a school – in a cowhouse. They went into their new convent on 24 September 1867. Because times were very hard, the Sisters tried to augment the meagre income of the poor by setting up an industrial department in the school in a separate apartment with a work store in March 1868 where they taught plain and crochet work. Industrial instruction was from 10.30a.m. – 3.30 p.m. with two hours devoted to literary instruction which was compulsory. The average attendance of pupils was 18, nearly all of them adults. They received between two shillings and five shillings per week according to their proficiency. This extra income was very welcome to the needy families of the area. Classes in the national school were conducted from 10a.m. – 3p.m. and followed the National Schools' Programme. Additions were added to this school in 1922, 1961 and 1983. In the 1960s the school became a parish school and in 2006 it amalgamated with St. Mary's School to become St. Bronagh's School. Sisters from the outset have been involved in visitation of the sick, elderly and needy of the parish and also as parish Sisters.

On 20 August 1866 the Convent of Mercy in Lurgan was founded from Newry. (See Co. Armagh)

Warrenpoint got its convent on 27 November 1888 at the invitation of Fr. Henry O' Neill. The first convent was in Havelock Place and the Sisters set up the Convent National School in St. Peter's Street on 7 January 1889 where it remained until 1939. When a decision was made to purchase the Great Northern Hotel in Warrenpoint as a boarding school for girls, the Sisters vacated Havelock Place and moved to this premises. As well as teaching, the Sisters were also faithful to the spirit of the foundress by visiting the elderly, sick and those in poor circumstances, bringing food and clothing. They also visited the local sanatorium every Sunday. When the bishop, Dr. Mulhern, requested that the boarding school should return to Newry, the Sisters moved out into a premises on the Shore Road.

The boarding school site was converted into St. Joseph's Home for Aged Men in 1938 and the Sisters returned to live there. Many additions and renovations took place over the years to comply with health and safety regulations and the increasing number of residents. The Home came under the management of Mercy Care in 2001.

As school attendance increased, the primary school was transferred to the pavilion behind St. Joseph's Home. Following the Northern Ireland Reform Act in 1988, co-education became the norm and in September 2000 a purpose-built school – St. Dallon's on the Clonallon Road – replaced the former single sex school.

In the early 1930s, the years of the depression, the Sisters provided free dinners in St. Peter's Hall for poor families during the week and at weekends they visited the homes bringing food and clothing. Many poor children received a pair of boots from the Sisters. The families got a gift of half a crown at Christmas. The children in deprived circumstances were exempt from the customary levy of one shilling per term to keep the gas fires going in the classrooms.

On 19 October 1991 a unique project was begun in Warrenpoint by Sr. Anna Maria Crawford R.I.P., Paula Jordan, Sarah Barr and Mary Burns. This lay/religious group came together to establish a weekend and holiday house which would provide respite care for those with mental handicaps, thus offering the guests a short holiday and their families a much needed break. All denominations are welcome and the project is run on voluntary donations. Many part-time volunteers give of their time and energy without any payment.

A missionary element was introduced on 15 August 1961 when five Sisters from Newry arrived settled in their new convent, St. Dominic's, Mobile, Alabama, U.S.A. The new school, St. Dominic's, opened with 262 pupils. Over the years the community was augmented with Sisters from Newry, Bessbrook and Lurgan. Today the school is still thriving and is well acclaimed throughout the district.

A further missionary venture was undertaken when a Sister was released from school in 1987 and another in 1996 to go to Minna in Nigeria. There they were engaged in

education, women's development and literacy, primary health care, the provision of clean water, community development, primary evangelisation and the development of parish councils. The idea of primary education for children was developed, beginning with a children's centre and when the law changed in the mid 1990s and the federal government allowed church-based schools to open again, the children's centre became a parish based nursery and primary school.

Sisters were not only involved in Primary and Second Level education, but one Sister became involved in Third Level education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

As time passed, changes occurred in society which had an influence on the lifestyle and ministry of the Sisters. Many of the works done by the Sisters in the early days were taken over by the state and, consequently, the focus of the Sisters changed accordingly but those victimised by society still are a matter of concern to them. Currently, some Sisters live in the traditional convents while others live in houses among the people. They are engaged in a wide range of apostolates which include visitation of the poor, sick and elderly at home and in hospital, counselling, helping people marginalised by addiction to alcohol or drugs, promoting personal development programmes, conflict resolution, promoting the development of women through various courses, parenting and marriage programmes.

The Sisters are also engaged in education at all levels and are very active in helping children with learning difficulties, promoting reading recovery and reading partnership programmes. Classes in the use of English are also provided for non-nationals who are also assisted in availing of government and local authority facilities. The Sisters are also involved in schools as members of boards of governors.

Sisters are also engaged in the nursing apostolate at various levels through nursing in the Homes and the use of alternative therapies. Some Sisters serve as chaplains in hospitals and the hospice while others act as pastoral carers.

Sisters are also very active as parish Sisters serving as sacristans, ministers of the Eucharist, readers, instruction of converts, preparing people for the sacraments, adult religious education, retreat work, spiritual direction.

The Sisters also liaise with various charitable and lay organisations such as St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Legion of Mary, Circle of Mercy, Lectio Divina groups.

Some Sisters are active in promoting the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults and in after-care programmes while others are engaged as facilitators for various groups.

All the Sisters, however, are engaged in the prayer apostolate and in trying to provide a listening ear to those in need or anxious, thus trying to promote human and Christian values in a fast-changing, technological age.