

## **ST MARY'S, CONVENT OF MERCY DROGHEDA 1854 – 2011**

At the request of Fr. T. Matthews P.P., St. Mary's Convent, Drogheda was founded from the Mercy Convent, Tullamore on the 8<sup>th</sup> November, 1854, octave of All Saints' Day. Four Sisters were chosen for the foundation and took up residence in No. 2, Dublin Road. After Mass the following morning the house was dedicated to Our Lady under the title 'Our Lady of Mercy'. Night classes were formed and the Sisters taught basic cookery, home-management and needlework – work very dear to Catherine McAuley. As the population of St. Mary's Parish grew, the parish priest saw the necessity for a school. The site was donated by the Matthews family. In 1857 a three storey building was erected for formal classes, known then as 'The Poor School'.

The top storey was used for senior pupils whose parents paid for their further education and was known as the Sacred Heart School.



*Sacred Heart School, Drogheda*

As the number of secondary pupils increased, a new home for them was found on a site adjacent to the presbytery in Sunnyside. Its doors were opened in 1960 and Sisters continued to be involved in education there until 1993.

[www.sacredheart.ie](http://www.sacredheart.ie)



*(The Old) Convent of Mercy, Dublin Road,  
Drogheda*

The number of Sisters was increasing and, consequently, Fr. Allen formed a fund-raising committee for a convent and in 1872 the foundation stone was laid. Subsequently, the Community left No. 2, Dublin Road and entered their lovely new home on the feast of St. Joseph 1879.

In addition to the regular school instruction of children and visiting the sick in their homes, the Sisters also established a Laundry and Hosiery industry which provided employment for girls leaving school. Both these ventures closed in 1947.

### **Nursing Care**

The Sisters approached the parish priest about the need for nursing care for patients in the Workhouse and consultation began with the Board of Guardians to have the Sisters recognised on the nursing staff. The Community sent two Sisters to Dundalk for training and experience in management, and in 1903 the Sisters were appointed to the staff. Now qualified to take over the nursing care of both Upper and Lower Infirmaries, the Board of Guardians accepted them and recognised the high standard of their work.

The first foundation from St. Mary's, Dublin Road was placed under the protection of St. Joseph. At first the Sisters walked daily to work from their convent on the Dublin Road. When a small convent was built for them it was named St. Joseph's. The Sisters carried out their Mercy Mission under great hardship and in difficult times even after the Workhouse became the Co. Home in 1924.

In 1970 the Lower Infirmary was demolished, the site was taken over by the North Eastern Health Board and a modern Home for geriatric patients was built. St. Mary's Home/Hospital for the elderly replaced the Upper Infirmary until in 1970 the County Hospital (Upper Infirmary) patients were transferred to the Lourdes Hospital under the care of the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

In 1991 St. Joseph's, now numbering four Sisters, was taken over by the North Eastern Health Board and used for independent living for patients. The Sisters returned to the convent on the Dublin Road.

### **Branching Out**



*Convent of Mercy, Laytown*

In the 1940s the parents in Laytown and Bettystown were getting anxious about their children's education and they approached the parish priest to ask the Sisters of Mercy to open a junior school. Four Sisters were chosen for the second foundation from St. Mary's.

The Sisters' holiday house, St. Mary's, was refurbished for this foundation, St. Anne's, another holiday house, was equipped for a junior

school and was opened in 1944 with an enrolment of 92 junior pupils. St. Mary's Convent was now ready for the Sisters, with the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the little oratory. A proper school, Mount Carmel was built on the grounds and opened in 1947.



*Mount Carmel, first school in Laytown*

### **Mission Abroad**

Early in 1956 the American bishops made an urgent appeal to the Irish bishops for Sisters to staff the Religious schools in their dioceses. Dr. Kyne, bishop of Meath, advised the Sisters in Drogheda to go on a foundation to Ballwin, St. Louis, a diocese connected with Meath, as Cardinal Glennon, a native of Meath would welcome the Sisters of Mercy.

After prayer and consideration the Community was willing to make the sacrifice to send four highly qualified Sisters on the foundation. The Sisters were asked to volunteer and four Sisters were selected – Srs. M. Xavier O Donnell, Gertrude Duffy, Bosco Daly and Berchmans Digan.



*Holy Infant  
Parish, Ballwin*

Preparations began for those pioneers to go to staff the school just opened. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1957, the four Sisters were airborne to the USA, where, after fourteen hours travel, they were welcomed by Mercy Sisters from St. Louis and introduced to their little convent and Catholic School in Holy Infant Parish. They adapted quickly to their new surroundings, climate, American

way of teaching and the formation of pupils in Christian values. Sr. Bosco – the only survivor of the four pioneers, taught for twenty years in Holy Infant and was very involved in parish work. The enrolment is now almost 1000 with a highly efficient staff under the principal, Sr. Rosario Delaney.

## **Post Vatican II**

Meanwhile, in Drogheda, as time passed Marymount National School and Holy Family Church were built to cope with the huge increase in population in new housing estates on the west side of the parish. In 1986 the parish of St. Mary's was divided and Holy Family Parish, Ballsgrove was born.



*Holy Family Church, Ballsgrove*

Before that, in the early 1970s, the Community in St. Mary's saw the need for a Mercy presence in this new fast-growing area. To begin with, Sisters commuted daily on foot to manage and teach in Marymount School.

Eventually, a house was purchased in the area and in 1991 a Mercy Community was established in Ballsgrove.

While the School is entirely staffed by lay teachers, a Mercy presence has been maintained consistently over the years and the Sister currently living there is involved in parish ministry at a number of levels.

In the early 1990s a Sister in Ballsgrove working with local people sowed and nurtured seeds which grew into the Women's Lifestyle Development Group, later named Lifestyle Development Group. Through skilled leadership, commitment, hard work, education and training over the next twenty years, this community development group has been and continues to be an instrument of empowerment, transformation and better quality of life not only for its members but for the whole area.



With the reduction in numbers of the Community, it was felt by 1994 that the large Convent on the Dublin Road was no longer viable and on 8<sup>th</sup> November of that year, the Garden Community was born with eight Sisters moving to a new, purpose-built home in the original Convent garden. The remaining members of the Dublin Road Community relocated to Laytown.

After withdrawing from schools, Sisters got involved in various groups in the parish, mainly in prayer ministry, liturgy and sacramental preparation for adults.

One Sister was Church sacristan for twenty two years.



*This is a photograph of the new 'garden' Convent, which is now home to the Visitation Sisters*