

Poverty and Destitution in Limerick

The plight of the catholic population, residing in Limerick's Old Town in the 1830s was utterly incredible, so wretched and miserable was their lot. Extreme poverty with its attendant afflictions of hunger and disease had left the people destitute. According to Rev. Thomas Enright, the curate in St. Mary's Parish, no less than 25 families were living in one house in 1834.¹

Henry D. Inglis, the English traveller who visited Limerick in the same year, gives a chilling account of his experiences during his visit and a lurid description of the scenes he witnessed there: "I spent a day in visiting those parts of the city where the greatest destitution and misery were said to exist. I entered upwards of forty of the abodes of poverty; and to the latest hour of my existence I can never forget the scenes of utter and hopeless wretchedness that presented themselves that day.... Some of the abodes I visited were garrets, some were cellars; some were hovels on the ground floor, situated in narrow yards, or alleys. I will not speak of the filth of the places....The inmates, were some of them old, crooked, and diseased; some younger, but emaciated, and surrounded by starving children; some were sitting on the damp ground, some standing, and many were unable to rise from their little straw heaps."² In addition, and resulting from such poverty, a pall of helplessness and despair and universal misery hung over the city.

Most Reverend Dr. John Ryan, Bishop of Limerick, was painfully aware of the plight of his flock and duly concerned for them. He had heard of the wonderful work that Catherine McAuley's sisters were doing for the poor in Dublin. In 1837, at the instigation of Miss Helena Heffernan, a benevolent Limerick lady who promised financial assistance, he besought Mother McAuley to establish a foundation in Limerick. Having recently lost five sisters through death and established foundations in Carlow and Cork, Catherine had not a single sister to spare. She promised, however, that when she had sisters to send, she would do so.

Prior to that time there had been religious communities in Limerick but, for one reason or another, they failed to persevere there. In 1812 the Poor Clare Order had established a foundation in the historic Peter's Cell and soon opened a school there. Though contemplatives, they continued to teach poor children, but owing to financial difficulties and the death of their Abbess in 1830, they had to disband. Three of the sisters, Anne Hewitt, Mary Shanahan and Catherine Shanahan remained on within their enclosure hoping and praying that God would send a community of nuns to join them. Sadly, in 1834, Sr. Catherine died a victim of the cholera plague that had been devastating the city. Prior to that, in 1833, the Presentation Sisters came to Peter's Cell and worked in the school. They struggled there for three years, but seeing no prospect of vocations they became discouraged and left. They re-settled subsequently in Sexton Street, in another parish of the city. Previously, in 1826, a group of Ursuline Sisters had founded a community in the North Strand, but they too disbanded after three years.

Bishop Ryan was hoping to secure the establishment of a community of Sisters of Mercy in Peter's Cell, the Poor Clare Convent, and he was determined to brook no opposition to that plan. Meanwhile, haunted by the horrific descriptions she had been hearing of the poor in Limerick, Catherine McAuley felt she had no choice but to accede to Bishop Ryan's request, sooner rather than later. She decided, therefore, to make a foundation in Limerick as early as possible in

¹ Courtney, Marie Therese, RSM. "The Nuns of St. Mary's" in *Sisters of Mercy in Limerick*. P.5

² Inglis, Henry D. *A Journey Throughout Ireland*. Vol. 1, p .302

1838. The person who would lead the sisters there would be the young and energetic Sr. Elizabeth Moore.

Anne Moore

Anne Moore was the daughter of James and Catherine Moore of St. James' Parish, Dublin. Born on Pentecost Sunday 1806, she was the only child in the family to have survived beyond infancy. Her father died when she was just seven years old. Anne spent much of her early years with her maternal grandmother who had some premonition about the little girl. It is said that on one occasion she laid her hand on her head and prayed: "May God bless you, my child! you seem marked out for a great end."³

Anne received her education in a ladies' seminary conducted by "the Misses Reynolds." She possessed a good knowledge of English, French and Music and had a sweet singing voice. She acquired as much Arithmetic as was deemed necessary for young ladies at the time. Dr. Michael Blake, her confessor and friend, desired that she should train as a catechist and made her president of the Sunday school that he had established in the parish of Saints Michael and John.

Baggot Street

On Pentecost Sunday, June 10, 1832, Anne Moore entered the Sisters of Mercy in Baggot Street on her 26th birthday. She had previously entered the Sisters of Charity, but did not persevere there. She now joined the fledgling community of the Sisters of Mercy which consisted of Mother McAuley, the two sisters professed with her, the early Associates who had been received five months previously and a few postulants. On October 8th she received the religious habit, taking as her patron saint, St. Elizabeth of Hungary who was renowned for deeds of charity.

Sr. Elizabeth's novitiate formation took place under the guidance of Catherine McAuley who was Novice Mistress from 1831-1835. The Rule was not yet confirmed nor even completely written, but, having the foundress herself for her guide, she received a thorough grounding in the principles and duties of the religious life as well as experiencing and imbibing at first hand the charism of Mercy. She was professed on October 8th 1834.

Sr. Elizabeth took part in all the activities and duties of the convent. From the moment of her entry in 1832 she accompanied Catherine McAuley to Townsend Street to tend the victims of the cholera epidemic that was ravaging Dublin and the country at that time. There she saw the appalling wretchedness of the victims and witnessed the fervent devotedness of Catherine and the sisters as they tended the sick. She learned, too, of the "cure," - heated port-wine - that they administered to the poor patients and which seemed to bring welcome relief.

Two years after her Profession she was placed in charge in Kingstown until she was chosen by Catherine to be the superior of the new foundation in Limerick in 1838.

Arrival of the Sisters of Mercy in Limerick.

On the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 24 September 1838, at eight o'clock in the evening, Catherine McAuley and her foundation party which comprised Elizabeth Moore (superioress), Sr. Vincent Harnett, a novice, Eliza Liston, a postulant and Sr. Aloysius Scott, (on loan for a time) came via Cork and Charleville to Peter's Cell, the Poor Clare Convent in Limerick.

³ (Carroll, Mary Austin, RSM). *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*. Vol. 1, p.323.

Darkness was beginning to fall and, because the laneway from the main street leading to the front entrance was too narrow and unsafe for a vehicle to turn in it, they had to enter through a door in the garden wall at the rear of the convent.

The two surviving Poor Clare Sisters, Anne Hewitt and Mary Shanahan, who had remained in their convent after the departure of their companions eight years previously, were waiting in the darkness at the garden door, with lighted candles in their hands, ready to give a big welcome to the Sisters of Mercy. Waiting with them was a young woman, Ellen Potter, who had been a postulant in Baggot Street, but who had to leave because of ill health. Now, her health restored, she was determined to enter again, this time in Limerick.

Sisters Anne and Mary, who were overjoyed at the coming of the “new nuns,” gave them a warm welcome into the convent. They had prayed and asked God to send them a community to which they could affiliate. They waited—and their waiting was rewarded. After a hearty meal and a good night’s rest, they all assembled for prayer in the convent chapel. The story goes that during the prayer the bell of St. Mary’s parish church rang out for Mass. Catherine, fearing that there would not be Mass in the convent, stood up, beckoned to her sisters who followed her, donned their street clothes and went out to Mass. The two Poor Clare sisters had never seen religious leave the enclosure except in their coffins. They were filled with astonishment and came to the conclusion that, like the other congregations before her that had come and gone, Mother McAuley had changed her mind and had taken her nuns back to Dublin! They began to sob and weep, as this, they felt, was their last hope. When the chaplain came to say Mass they told him their sad story. He assured them that they had been mistaken. Great was their delight when Catherine and the sisters returned from Mass. Catherine had the highest regard for the two Poor Clares whom she considered to be two old saints. They were soon affiliated to the Mercy Congregation and became two wonderful Mercy sisters. Henceforth the convent would be called “St. Mary’s”.

The door through which Catherine, Elizabeth and the founding party entered had, until 1988 been indicated by a statue of Our Lady. In that year, to mark the sesquicentenary of the Limerick foundation, a mosaic was commissioned for the doorway, depicting the arrival of the “black” sisters (the Mercies) being welcomed by the “brown” sisters (the Poor Clares)

Limerick Foundation – Initial Anxieties

There were initial anxieties regarding the Limerick foundation. Catherine, Elizabeth and the sisters soon realised the extent of the poverty, destitution, despair and universal misery that surrounded them. Knowing that three congregations before them had failed to survive, Catherine must have wondered whether they would be able to cope or whether the same fate would befall her Sisters of Mercy as had befallen the other congregations.

Writing to sister Teresa White in Kingstown on 12th October, 1838, less than a month after arriving in Limerick, Catherine pleads for prayers for the new foundation: “Get the sisters to invoke their patron saints,” she writes, “and implore saint Teresa, who loved foundations, to intercede for poor Limerick where no seed has yet taken root”⁴ Two weeks later, on October 25th, in a letter to Sister Frances Warde, in Carlow, she informs her of the difficulties she is encountering in Limerick, which, she feels needs her presence for longer than the usual month she was wont to spend with new foundations: “I cannot go for a full month. No person of less

⁴ Bolster, Mary Angela, RSM. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841*, p.67

experience could manage at present, and I am very insufficient for the task”⁵ Later appalled by the hopeless condition of the poor, she writes again to Frances Warde: “The poor here are in a most miserable state. The whole surrounding neighbourhood (is) one scene of wretchedness and sorrow”⁶

A more immediate cause of anxiety, however, was the obvious change in personality that had occurred in Mother Elizabeth Moore, the superioress. The once staunch, brave and energetic Elizabeth seemed to have become a prey to nervousness and timidity and did not seem at all equal to the role of superioress. This was a cause of concern to Catherine who referred to it in her letter of October 25th to Sister Frances Warde: “As for Sister Elizabeth (Moore), with all her readiness to undertake it, we never sent such a faint-hearted soldier, now that she is in the field. She will do all interior and exterior work, but to meet on business, confer with the Bishop, conclude with a Sister - you might as well send the child that opens that door ... she gets white as death and her eyes like fever.” She adds, however, “She is greatly liked, and when the alarms are a little over, and a few in the House, I expect all will go well.”⁷ – an expectation that was to prove prophetic.

Hopeful Beginnings

Notwithstanding these anxieties the beginnings in Limerick were hopeful. Postulants began to arrive immediately. All, including Elizabeth, gallantly rose to the challenge. The works of mercy got off to a quick start. At the convent, soup, bread and meat were supplied daily to the needy at appointed times; visitation of the sick and needy in their homes, both in the city and in the suburbs, was carried out daily. The Poor School, already functioning under the Poor Clares was taken over by the Sisters of Mercy; a House of Mercy for the protection and training of women was opened in the lower part of the school as early as 19th November. The House of Mercy provided a safe environment for girls, who were easily at risk loitering about the lanes. It gave them a religious and technical training and prepared them for gainful employment.

Sunday school was soon established for the factory workers. They came in their hundreds for instruction week after week.

The professed sisters were very well received by the people of Limerick and their work greatly welcomed. There was little regard, however, for the postulants, as is evident from the story of the poor woman who called to the convent asking to speak to one of the sisters to whom she wished to tell her troubles. On being met by the postulant on duty who was willing to offer a sympathetic ear, the woman was not impressed. She wanted to speak to one of the “real nuns” one whose head, unlike the postulant’s, was covered by “the holy veil”⁸.

Catherine soon realised that the postulants “would not do well until attired in the Religious Dress “and “that even the poor don’t like the net caps (postulants) so well to speak to them, but turn to the others.”⁹ Aware that the veil was all important to the people with whom the sisters were working, in the interest of the apostolate, she decided to dispense with the six months postulancy regulation and arranged for the reception of the three postulants who had entered since the sisters’ arrival in Limerick some three months previously. The reception ceremony took place on 4th December and attracted a huge crowd of local people and visitors.

⁵ Ibid., p.69

⁶ Ibid., p.74

⁷ Ibid., p.69

⁸ (Carroll, Mary Austin, RSM) *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy* Vol. 1, p.288

⁹ Bolster, Op. cit., p.74

Satisfied and filled with gratitude to God that the work of Mercy in Limerick was progressing so favourably, Catherine decided that she could now depart. On December 9th Mother McAuley bade farewell to Limerick and returned to Baggot Street, not before leaving to Mother Elizabeth the now famous advice to a superior: “Don’t let Crosses Vex or Tease.”

Mother Elizabeth Moore – Worker for the Poor

On Catherine’s departure Elizabeth had to face up to the fact that now, she alone, was first in command. She would no longer enjoy the supportive presence of Catherine. “Lord what wilt Thou have me to do” was the motto she had chosen at her profession and which she had inscribed on her ring. She was under no illusion as to what the Lord would have her do. It was His will that she should be the superioress of a new foundation with a ministry to a most impoverished population. Aware of her limitations and inadequacies she knew that of herself she would not be equal to such a task, but she also knew that God is faithful to His promises and that if he wanted her to do this work He would equip her and enable her to do it. With implicit faith in God’s promises and in His enabling power she made her own the words of St. Paul “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” She successfully continued the works already begun by Catherine and courageously embarked on new ministries, her single minded aim being the relief of the crippling misery of the poor people of Limerick. Any initiative that could benefit them was resolutely undertaken.

Following a visit to Limerick by Fr. Matthew, the Apostle of Temperance, Mother Elizabeth proudly wore her Temperance Badge. She established the Christian Doctrine Society for Adults, making it a condition of membership to take the pledge. It numbered about 400 women. Every Sunday the members who were rapidly increasing met in the “Cell” and, having listened to a stimulating instruction and joined in some short prayer, they received books from the library established for the use of the members. A small sum of money was paid by the richer members each week, out of which a modest loan fund was formed, from which poorer members could borrow, interest free, to set themselves up in little businesses and to help earn a frugal livelihood. The sick received a weekly sum. Financial aid was frequently given from the fund to cover the funeral expenses of deceased members. The initiative was a veritable Credit Union cum social club.

A night school was opened where religious instruction was given to adults to prepare them for the reception of the sacraments. Many who attended these classes were unable to make their confession in English. To deal with the problem Mother Elizabeth took up the study of the Irish language. Helped by Sr. Mary, the Poor Clare sister, who spoke and read Irish fluently, and another sister, she compiled a simple catechism in Irish and the community spent their recreation hours learning how to instruct their pupils in the rudiments of the faith through the medium of the Irish language.

By 1843 Mother Elizabeth had received permission to visit the prisons of Limerick and prison ministry became an important aspect of the work of Mercy. Elizabeth and others spent long hours with prisoners, including those condemned to be hanged. The Limerick Annals tell of her visits to a woman condemned to death for having assented to the murder of her husband. Elizabeth visited her every day, even during the August retreat, preparing her for death, until she was finally executed.¹⁰ Visitation of the hospitals was also undertaken and patients looked forward to the sisters’ visits.

¹⁰ *Annals Sisters of Mercy, Limerick 1859-1875*, Vol. 2, p.116

To counteract the proselytising of poor catholic children who were suffering from famine and disease, Mother Elizabeth was concerned that good religious instruction would be given in the Poor School in Saint Mary's. She also took the unusual step, at that time, of establishing out-schools when an opportunity presented itself—one in Pery Square and later, one in Back Clare Street. The sisters travelled out from their convent to these schools and were glad to suffer the many inconveniences of travel, lack of space, unsuitable rooms and lack of ventilation, when it meant serving and saving poor catholic children of the city.

The outbreak of the cholera epidemic in Limerick in August 1849 proved a daunting challenge to Mother Elizabeth and her community. Having experienced the trauma of the victims in Townsend Street during her postulancy, Elizabeth was well equipped both emotionally and professionally to deal with the situation in Limerick. She sent her sisters to the two hospitals which were given over entirely for cholera patients - St. John's and Barrington's. Four sisters went to each hospital each day and remained overnight in active constant attendance on the patients. They were relieved by four others in each hospital who took over from them next day. This continued for a whole month. Elizabeth herself, as she had seen Catherine McAuley doing in Townsend Street, visited the patients each day and administered the 'cure' that was so effective with the victims there. A further outbreak of cholera in 1854, though not as severe, again made its demands on the sisters. Elizabeth went daily to all the wards, though now her own health was beginning to fail.

Mother Elizabeth's next venture was the opening of an orphanage in 1850 on the southern side of the city. A large convent, known as Mount St. Vincent's, was soon built on the site in which 250 children were housed and trained for suitable jobs. Orphans who previously had been housed in a portion of the House of Mercy were transferred to the new building.

On receiving an endowment in 1861 from Fr. William O'Meara, a Franciscan priest, Mother Elizabeth established a house for poor widows which was located on the Mount Saint Vincent campus and was managed by the Sisters of Mercy.

Seeing the need for well paid local employment, Elizabeth Moore embarked on a project of lace making. She had been informed that if she could succeed in getting Valenciennes lace made it would be a very financially rewarding industry. Consequently, she employed two teachers from Belgium to teach the craft to local girls, who when they mastered the craft, were paid according to the quality and quantity of their output. Two Sisters supervised the work and became proficient lace-makers. Eventually, however, there was difficulty in finding a stable market for a sufficient quantity of the lace to make it a viable project, and so the industry had to be abandoned. Limerick lace was also taught successfully in the orphanage, but that too, had to be discontinued for health reasons.

Always on the alert for any work or project that could give employment to the women and girls of the city, Mother Elizabeth, as Mother Assistant, secured a government contract for the making of shirts for the Navy. Tait's factory supplied the cut out garments and the finished work was returned there. The contract was lucrative for the orphans and young women of the House of Mercy and also for housewives who took on the work which earned them a much needed income.

In 1861 Mother Elizabeth was requested by Lord Monsell to take charge of the Workhouse Hospital so that the poor might have proper nursing and kind treatment. In reply to his request,

Mother Elizabeth is reported to have said “that since the object of her order was to attend the sick she could not refuse any proposition of the sort made which was to nurse the sick in the Workhouse, because if she did she would be acting inconsistently with the spirit of the order.”¹¹ In due course, the Sisters of Mercy took on this additional charge.

Foundations

While Mother Elizabeth gave total commitment to the poor of Limerick she was not unmindful of the needs of other places. When requests came, therefore, from Bishops and priests in other dioceses she readily responded with characteristic generosity of spirit. The first foundation from St. Mary’s was made in Kinsale (1844); followed by others in Killarney (1844); Mallow (1845); Glasgow (1849); Roscommon (1853); Ennis (1854); Edinburgh (1858). Mother Elizabeth accompanied the sisters to the new foundations and stayed with them for the usual month. Due to ill health, however, she was unable to travel to Edinburgh, but visited the community the following year. By the time she had established the seventh foundation she had parted with some thirty-seven of her sisters who had lived and worked with her in St. Mary’s. The biggest sacrifice of all was the loss of Sr. Vincent Harnett whom she sent as superioress to Roscommon. She had come from Baggot Street with her in 1838 and had been her Assistant from the beginning.

Expansion of the community in Limerick had also been undertaken with Branch Houses being established in Mount. St. Vincent (1850); Newcastlewest (1850); Rathkeale (1850); Adare (1854) and City Home and Hospital (1861). The timidity that had assailed Mother Elizabeth in her early days in Limerick was long gone and had given way to a fearless determination to answer the call of Mercy from wherever it came. With indomitable courage she and her sisters worked with energy, sharing what they had with the poor of the city and appealing on their behalf for aid, financial and otherwise. In this way she laid the foundation of the many social services that, not until years later, were provided by the State.

Mother Elizabeth was fortunate that in all her enterprises she had the full support of Most Rev. Dr. John Ryan, Bishop of Limerick. From his initial meeting with her, Bishop Ryan believed in her worth and encouraged and supported her every undertaking, both morally and often financially, placing no restraint on her save the injunction not to incur debt. Equally, she had the support of the people of Limerick who in the latter years of her leadership rallied to her assistance in an extraordinary way. On hearing of her plans for new projects they formed committees to support the ventures. Mother Elizabeth was blessed, above all, in that her community was growing rapidly. Each year many talented and enthusiastic young women requested to be admitted, thus enabling her to take on ministries she felt were needed.

Side by side with such blessings and successes, however, was the inevitable shadow of the cross. Financial difficulties were there in plenty; more work than it was possible to accomplish seemed ever to await her; her own ill health and the sickness and untimely deaths of sisters were painful realities, especially the death of Sr. Teresa Potter who went to her reward just three months after her profession. Painful too, was the parting with many of her finest sisters to make foundations elsewhere. Not the least of her sorrows was the death of Bishop Ryan, her faithful friend and supporter.

Mother Elizabeth’s achievements in ministry were truly remarkable. The annals tell us that “she sought not herself to get up additional works, but did not refuse any that were proposed to her

¹¹ Courtney, “Cholera Ravages Limerick.” In *Sisters of Mercy in Limerick*. P.40

when compatible with the spirit of the order, and that she could prudently undertake them .She ever calmly awaited the will of the Most High, which she executed promptly when it was made manifest; neither did she readily give up anything once undertaken for God’s honour, no matter what trials attended its execution.”¹²

This is the greatness of Elizabeth Moore. Through an expectant faith in God’s enabling power she seemed to go beyond her natural capacity and moved from being the “faint hearted soldier” of a few months previous to being a fearless leader ready to conduct business and confer with bishop, priest and nobleman.

If reflecting on her life has any message for us today, it must surely be to take God at His word, as she did, and to believe that if he wants us to do His work, He will enable us.

Mother Elizabeth Moore—The Superioress

Extending the Mercy Congregation to other countries and counties as well as furthering the apostolate in Limerick undoubtedly engaged much of Mother Elizabeth’s time and energy. Yet these activities in no way took from her commitment to her role as superior of her community which involved the management of the convent affairs and the spiritual and temporal care of the sisters in her charge. This responsibility she took very seriously.

As a superioress Mother Elizabeth would have been considered strict and exacting, a no-nonsense woman who prized highly the gift of a religious vocation and believed passionately in the religious life. She felt it her duty to encourage the sisters under her care to live up to the high ideals of their religious calling. Deeply interested in their spiritual growth she inculcated in them the practice of solid religious virtues and urged them to have but one object in view in all their activities—God Alone. Fidelity to prayer and the cultivation of a deep interior life, strict adherence to the common life and the cultivation of a strong community spirit - these she saw as the best safeguards to the religious life.

Gossip of any kind, within or without of the convent, remarks about sisters or curiosity about the financial state of their families, Mother Elizabeth intensely abhorred. These, she felt, were the real enemies of community and the religious spirit. She preferred to hear of the faults of a sister from her own lips rather than from another sister. She advocated uniformity and was averse to any singularities in dress, possessions or behaviour. It was her wish that all should work, pray and recreate together. Similarly, privileges of any kind, expected by sisters or their relatives, were rarely, if ever, forthcoming. This, in particular, earned for Mother Elizabeth the reputation of “strictness,” but though she was aware of this, she never capitulated when her conscience dictated a certain course of action.

A maxim that she frequently instilled in the sisters was that “a religious should be so recollected as ever to know what she was saying and doing.” Another favourite was “one should be seen before she would be heard.”¹³

Unusual for her time, perhaps, she generally ensured that sisters were employed according to their capabilities and for works to which they were suited and had a desire to do.

For the first five years of her superiorship Mother Elizabeth was also Novice Mistress, taking charge of the formation of the novices and postulants from 1838 – 1843. She was equally attentive to the religious development of the young people as to that of the community sisters.

¹² *Annals Sisters of Mercy, Limerick 1859-1875* Vol. 2, p.89

¹³ *Annals Sisters of Mercy, Limerick 1859-1875* , Vol.2, p.93

She attended to their physical and spiritual needs, read their morning lecture, and gave the special instruction for one/two months before reception and profession. The annalist tells us that “she sometimes managed to do this from 7 o’clock to 7.25 in the morning as the community Mass was not celebrated until 7.30 a.m. in the early years. She did this, when possible, so as to be free for the various and unforeseen calls she had to meet during the rest of the day as Mother Superior.”¹⁴

Mother Elizabeth Moore – The Woman

Despite Mother Elizabeth’s reputation of strictness and the demand for uniformity and for an unflinching observance of all that was conducive to the religious ideal, there is no mention in the Annals that sisters resented her leadership or that they felt in any way oppressed by it. On the contrary, there is frequent reference to the admiration, respect and esteem that the sisters had for her. “They were warmly attached to her” we read “and looked up to her with instinctive veneration.”¹⁵ Proof of this ‘veneration’ was the fact that she held office as Rev. Mother for twenty-four consecutive years. Her last twelve years in office were by special rescripts from Rome, at the request of the sisters. Even when, through declining health in 1862, she asked not to be re-elected, the sisters voted her in as Assistant Rev. Mother.

It would seem then, that Mother Elizabeth’s popularity as superioress was because of the woman that she was, a woman of transparent integrity and of sterling qualities of character which the sisters recognised in her. She could afford to be exacting on her sisters because she practised what she preached and never asked any sister to do what she herself was not prepared to do, leading by example as much as by command or precept. “Her appearance and manners were those of a perfect religious ... calm, earnest, well regulated; her movements were noiseless, easy and self possessed. Without effort and with total absence of anything like pomp, her whole comportment and look inspired reverence and esteem.”¹⁶

Though firm and strict she was just and fair and had no favourites, qualities in a leader that any group would appreciate. Despite a certain aloofness in appearance she was compassionate and tender to the point of shedding tears when told of the sufferings of the poor. When sisters were ill and needed support they could rely on her sympathy and love. A woman of her word, she never made a promise that she did not fulfil. Intellectually, she was well endowed, though she was more practical than philosophical in her approach to life. In the words of her successor, Rev. Mother Clare McNamara, “she had a noble mind.”¹⁷

Her most outstanding characteristic was a profound and wholesome humility that allowed her to see her true self, as she was, with her limitations and her gifts. Her humility was apparent in her dealings with the sisters. With them she was totally unpretentious, had no desire for power nor for pomp of any kind. On many occasions she gave proof of this humility, such as sending for a sister at a Branch House for the sole purpose of expressing her fears that she had spoken to her too strongly earlier. Her humility was evident too, in her obedience to the new Rev. Mother who was, in fact, her own novice. .

Mother Elizabeth was capable of deep friendship, was very loyal to the sisters and to her friends and, in turn, had many loyal friends.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 92

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 97

¹⁶ Ibid., p.93

¹⁷ *Annals Sisters of Mercy, Limerick 1850-1875*, Vol. 2, p. 90

Relationship with Catherine McAuley

She had a great love and veneration for Catherine McAuley. She was Catherine's own novice and lived in Baggot Street from 1832 to 1837. A deep and lasting friendship developed between these two great women. To the end of her days Elizabeth fondly cherished Catherine's maxims and practices: "when speaking of our Foundress, or referring to the early days of the Order, an expression of peculiar pleasure and interest beamed over her countenance. It was a subject that seemed always new and untiring to her; one that she longed to dwell on and detail over and over to her children."¹⁸

Mother Elizabeth kept all the letters that Catherine wrote to her between 1839 and 1840 and read them at intervals to the Sisters. On December 12th each year, which she always held as a holiday, the sisters gathered around the wreathed portrait of Catherine and recited a poem in her honour, specially composed for the occasion.

Catherine's letters to Elizabeth give us an insight into her love and affection for Elizabeth and into the unique friendship that existed between them, even to the use of the familiar name of "Kitty" which, evidently, outside of her own family, was used only by Elizabeth¹⁹. It was at Elizabeth's request that Mother McAuley wrote her account of the origins and development of the Mercy Congregation.

Elizabeth had the privilege and consolation of being with Catherine during her last illness and at her death. She witnessed her last words of instruction and encouragement to the sisters and supported her in prayer as she passed to eternity. To Elizabeth we owe an account of Catherine's illness and death together with the words of Catherine's *Suscipe*,²⁰ now so frequently prayed and sung worldwide.

First General Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy.

It was Mother Elizabeth's loyalty and devotion to Mother McAuley and to the religious practices that the foundress laid down for the congregation that prompted her insistence on uniformity and adherence to the rule and customs and which earned for her the reputation of strictness. It is quite probable that, in the early days in Baggot Street, Elizabeth and the other members of the community would have been involved with Catherine in establishing the customs to be observed and would have known the thinking behind each one. It is no wonder then that she desired to preserve these in their integrity as well as the religious spirit that animated them. Other superiors thought likewise and were anxious that a General Chapter of the congregation should be convened to discuss the matter of customs and produce a Guide that would consolidate all that had been established by the foundress. It was intended that such a meeting would take place in the Mother House in Baggot Street. In 1846, in preparation for the envisaged Chapter, the superioress of Baggot Street, Mother Cecilia Marmion, drew up a draft document for discussion. Unfortunately, due to various circumstances and the death of the Mother Cecilia, the Chapter was not convened at that time. Almost twenty years later, in 1864 the need for such a Chapter became more pressing. The congregation was expanding and many of the pioneering sisters of the congregation were dispersing, some to make foundations in foreign lands, others passing to their eternal reward. Mother Elizabeth, now Mother Assistant

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100

¹⁹ Sullivan, Mary C. *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. "Mary Elizabeth (Anne) Moore, 1806-1868," Chapter 9, p. 251

²⁰ Sullivan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 253

and Mother Clare, her superioress, were increasingly anxious that, despite such changes, the original spirit of the congregation would be maintained. They again became active in progressing the matter of convening a Chapter. As it was not feasible to hold it in Baggot Street, it was agreed that it would be held in Limerick from 8th to 19th March 1864, hosted by Mother Clare and Mother Elizabeth. Accordingly, invitations to attend were sent to the superioresses in Ireland, England and Scotland. Mother Elizabeth, though no longer superioress, was chosen to chair the Chapter sessions which were attended by some nineteen representatives from Ireland and England. Mother Francis Bridgeman who, twenty years previously, had left Limerick to establish a foundation in Kinsale, compiled a document for discussion, enlarging on the Baggot street draft of 1846.

The Chapter was considered very successful and resulted in the production of a small edition of the Guide or Directory which was confirmed by the votes of all present. Mother Elizabeth was satisfied that, at last, there was a Directory that would regularise customs for the houses of the congregation regardless of where they were located.

Illness and death of Mother Elizabeth Moore

A life of intense labour for the spread of God's Kingdom in Limerick and further afield, coupled with the inevitable stress and strain of twenty-four years in administration, eventually took its toll on Mother Elizabeth.

Though she suffered for many years from a complication of diseases, it was only in the last five or six years of her life that her medical condition became more acute. She seemed to exhibit an increasing nervous debility that affected her whole system, (which today we would call total burn-out) and suffered from a painful swelling in her feet that could only be relieved by rest. Despite failing health, however, she tried to the end to be engaged, as far as possible, in the ministries of the community and to carry out the daily tasks to the best of her ability. As her condition worsened, she was forced to cut down on her activities. Making light of her suffering she would jokingly remark "Considering that the whole machine is past repair I get on wonderfully well and may hobble on a few years yet"²¹ or in reference to her swollen feet: "my understanding has again rebelled and I have been ordered to keep still."²²

Gradually, the end was approaching and she knew it, though the sisters, in denial, failed to see that she was in her death illness. Confined to bed for some two weeks in January of 1868 she waited with great patience and calmness for the Lord's call home. The sisters, now in no doubt about the gravity of her illness, kept constant vigil at her bedside, prayed with her and tried to relieve her bodily and mental suffering. At the request of Rev. Mother Clare she prayed a blessing on each sister, on the houses she had founded, on the whole Mercy Congregation and on the novices to whom she gave this parting advice: "Avoid small sins, mind little things and cultivate purity of heart."²³

Finally, having received the last sacraments, on January 19th 1868—the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, her favourite feast, at 2.40 in the afternoon, Mother Elizabeth Moore went to her eternal reward.

Funeral and Burial

²¹ Carroll, Op. cit., p.338

²² letter from Mother Elizabeth Moore to Sr. M. de Chantal Meagher, 1857

²³ *Annals Sisters of Mercy, Limerick 1859-1875*, Vol. 2, p. 102

Her funeral was a celebration of her spiritually rich and selfless life. His Lordship, Bishop Butler, celebrated the Requiem Mass. Clergy from all over the diocese and the sisters from St. Mary's and the Branch Houses together with seculars, rich and poor, from the city accompanied her remains to the convent cemetery, bidding a final good bye to the woman who "quitted the world to serve God and His poor representatives amidst the miseries of roofless garrets or noisome cellars."²⁴ She was interred in the convent cemetery under a beautiful willow tree that she had loved to admire and contemplate during her lifetime. The Sisters intended to erect a mortuary Chapel over her grave to honour her memory, but lack of space proved an obstacle to the idea. Some time later the cemetery needed to be extended. In the course of the work it was found that the roots of the willow tree were damaging the coffins and it had to be cut down. Mother Elizabeth's remains were exhumed from the first grave and re-interred in a new grave lined with mason work. To-day, a large Celtic cross in the centre of the extended cemetery marks the grave of this humble but great woman.

Tributes

Innumerable Masses were offered for the repose of Mother Elizabeth's soul in St. Mary's Convent and all over the diocese. Tributes poured in from convents and friends at home and abroad. "Of Elizabeth Moore" wrote her friend, Monsignor Richard O'Brien, Dean and Vicar General of Limerick, "everything can be said that could be said of devotion untiring, fine conceptions of religious and educational progress and wonderful success ... She had all the quiet enthusiasm of faith and love and calculating prudence that made great enthusiasm great virtue."²⁵

It is, however, in the *City Journal's* report of her death that one captures the feelings of the people of Limerick for Mother Elizabeth: "Death has just removed from amongst us one of the noblest champions of Christian Charity, one of the most self-sacrificing of beings... who has served to raise Limerick to the lofty position it occupies in the estimation of the entire Catholic world The bereavement is one which saddens not only the religious community of which (she) was foundress ... but the thousands of the poor to whom she assiduously ministered, ... the sick and afflicted of whom she was the constant consoler and aider, ... the children of the many schools over which she presided with unceasing vigilance."²⁶

The greatest tribute of all that could be paid to Mother Elizabeth would surely be that we, her spiritual daughters, would give evidence in our lives of the spirit that she laboured to inculcate in the sisters of her day and that to all whose lives we touch we would be a sign of God's eternal love.

²⁴ "Death and Funeral Obsequies of Mrs Moore, in Religion, Mother Mary Elizabeth, at the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy, Peter's Cell." Paper cutting from the *City Journal, Limerick* (January 1868)

²⁵ O'Brien, Richard Baptist. *An Eight-Day Retreat*. P. xii

²⁶ "Death and Funeral Obsequies of Mrs Moore, in Religion, Mother Mary Elizabeth, at the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy, Peter's Cell." Paper cutting from the *City Journal, Limerick* (January 1868)