

Immigrants, Cholera and the Saint John Sisters of Charity

*The first ten years of the Sisters
of Charity of the Immaculate Conception,
Saint John, N. B.
1854-1864*

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Saint John, New Brunswick, situated on the Bay of Fundy at the mouth of the river from which it takes its name, was visited early in the 16th and 17th century by explorers and fishermen. We know with certainty that Champlain entered the estuary of the river on the feast of St. John the Baptist in 1604 and so named it. An enterprising outpost of New England in prerevolutionary days, it became a thriving centre when the Loyalists came in the spring and summer of 1783 and within two years it was an incorporated city, the first in British North America.

Apart from missionary activity among the Indians in the area and ministrations to the few Acadians who occasionally settled for short periods at the mouth of the river, the Church was not established in the area until the early 19th century. Father Charles D. Ffrench, an Irish Dominican who was a convert and the son of an Anglican Bishop, had been saying Mass in the City Court Room on Market Square for several years before he built a chapel on Sydney Street. The ecumenical spirit that prevailed in the city at the time is shown in a letter of Father Ffrench to the Mayor of Saint John, thanking the Protestant citizens for their contribution to the building project.¹

In 1842, the diocese of New Brunswick was created, with the see at Fredericton to which the capital of the Province had been moved from Saint John. William Dollard, a zealous missionary in the area, was consecrated the first Bishop. On his death Thomas Louis Connolly was appointed his successor; he appealed immediately to the Holy See to have the bishopric moved to Saint John, not only

¹ Reverend Charles D. FFRENCH, Letter to the Mayor of Saint John, Quoted in J.W. LAWRENCE, *Footprints or Incidents in the Early History of New Brunswick*, 1883, pp. 85-86.

because Saint John was the largest centre in the Province and the one most likely to grow, but there lived there many more Catholics and, in addition, the Anglicans had established their see at Fredericton. Bishop Dollard had reported that the Catholic population was about one-third that of the total² and this proportion seems to have remained fairly constant; the present population of Saint John is 109,000, while there are approximately 35,000 Catholics.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the fisheries, the timber trade and shipbuilding were bringing a great deal of prosperity to the city. As W.S. McNutt writes of its favored position in the early 1840's, "A city of over 30,000, Saint John was unchallenged in the pre-eminence of her commerce."³ In 1854, the year our story begins, a total of 1,930 ships entered the harbor and 1,990 set sail from it.⁴ It was the period, too, of greatest activity in the shipbuilding industry. Here were built some of the most substantial and fastest of the clipper ships. The *Marco Polo*, for example, outstripped a steamship on the trip to Australia by a full week. Reciprocity with United States (1854) was to bring yet greater financial benefits to the large merchant class.

In spite of all this activity and the consequent success in business, the city was notoriously filthy. All attempts to get proper sewerage and water were thwarted. The City Council seems to have been cowed by the merchant princes and the Board of Health (there actually was one!) was lethargic and ineffectual. Thus when a case of cholera was brought in on the ship *BLANCHE* in April, 1854 it was not long before the city had an epidemic. Five thousand persons were stricken; 1,500 died from the dread disease. In a population where the number of poor was large and numbers of people were scarcely over the effects of ship fever (typhus) experienced during the great immigration of 1847, the results were devastating, not only for the poor but also for the well-to-do. The care of orphaned children became the priority of the day among both Catholics and

² Public Archives of Canada (hereafter designated PAC), Microfilm F842, F 196a, #11240: Dollard to Choislât-Gallien, Secretary, Association for the Propagation of the Faith, Paris, dated 29 August, 1845, St. John, N. B.

³ W.S. McNurr, *New Brunswick: A History 1784-1867*, Toronto, MacMillan of Canada, 1963, p. 277.

⁴ H.Y. HIND, T.C. KEEFER, *et al.*, *Eighty Years of Progress of British North America*, Toronto, L. Stebbens, 1863, "Saint John," pp. 637-640.

Protestants, and within three months of one another, each group had responded to the crisis by providing adequate shelter and care for these unfortunate children. Since many of the poor were Irish Catholics, Bishop Thomas Louis Connolly took the traditional 19th century approach to the problem, the securing of religious women and the establishing of an orphanage.

It was, then, in 1854 that the Sisters of Charity, dedicated to the care of orphans and the education of youth, were founded in Saint John. As their numbers increased, they opened missions throughout New Brunswick and eventually in six other Provinces of Canada. In more recent years the Sisters answered the call of "Good Pope John XXIII" and sent several of their members to Peru.

In addition to the initial works of the Sisters, care of the aged has been and continues to be a major interest, as has nursing the sick and other health care apostolates. The very *raison d'être* of the foundation was to save the children from "the heretics," and religious education has always been of utmost concern for the Sisters. The more recently developed approaches to ministry in the Church find expression in such apostolates as pastoral assistants, parish visiting, hospital and prison chaplaincies.

The peak years for membership were from the late 1920's through the 1950's; but, since Vatican Council II, the general picture witnessed in all religious congregations exists in this one, too. There has been a considerable attrition by defection and loss by death. Again, as in most other Communities, there has been a dearth of vocations. Of the present 330 members, thirty percent are retired or are nearing retirement age. However, the Sisters prayerfully look for new fields for their possible activities, while awaiting a resurgence of youthful interest in a life dedicated to Christ through the three vows and commitment to community living.

The history of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception in Saint John, New Brunswick, may be said to have had its beginning in 1815 with the birth of Thomas Connolly and Honoria Conway, the one in Ireland and the other, due to the circumstances of war, in England.

Thomas Connolly was born in Cork in 1815. At the age of sixteen Thomas entered the Capuchin Novitiate, and at eighteen he was sent to Rome for intensive study and training. In 1838 he was ordained to the priesthood in the Cathedral of Lyons, France. He

then returned to Ireland, where he worked as a prison chaplain in Dublin.

When Right Reverend William Walsh went to Halifax in 1842 as Coadjutor to Bishop Fraser of Arichat, Nova Scotia, Father Connolly accompanied him as his secretary. Upon their arrival in Nova Scotia, the Bishop found ecclesiastical affairs in an unsettled state because of the great discord between the Scots and the Irish. Bishop Walsh appointed Connolly administrator and went immediately to Rome. On his return in 1845 as Bishop of the newly created Diocese of Halifax, he found that the young priest had performed his duties so well that he assigned him to the office of vicar general. During the years that Father Connolly held this position, he worked tirelessly among the poor, especially caring for the immigrants who arrived at the port. During an epidemic among these people, he contracted the disease, and was seriously ill.

Upon the death of Bishop Dollard, the first bishop of New Brunswick, Connolly was chosen to succeed him and was consecrated on August 15, 1852. Saint John at that moment, was suffering from the problems of mass immigration of poor Irish, particularly that of the year 1847 when over 50 ships had brought 17,000 of Ireland's poverty-stricken to this port. When cholera struck Saint John in 1854, these were the people who succumbed most quickly. It became necessary for the new bishop to find homes for the orphans of these people. In this he was assisted by Honoria Conway.

The Conway family was Welsh-Irish, from the west of Wales. Michael Conway, the father of Honoria, enlisted in the Galway militia under his uncle, Lt. Colonel Martin, and became a sergeant. He met his future wife, Eleanor McCarthy, at the home of her father, Timothy McCarthy, who was the barrack-master at Inchygeela near Cork. They had three children: Margaret, born April 19, 1806, at Ballinasloe, Galway; Honoria, and Charles.

Honoria Conway was born while her father was with the garrison at Dover Castle. Honoria's mother came from Ballinasloe, Ireland to visit with her husband at the castle, and while there, Honoria was born in June 1815. Her early years were spent in Ballinasloe; but she and her mother emigrated to America in 1837, and eventually settled in Meteaghan, N. S.

THE "GREAT HUNGER" AND ITS AFTERMATH

In Honoria's early lifetime the Ballinasloe area had fallen on hard times. Famines, consequent upon crop failure in 1816, 1822 and 1831, caused great distress and those who found it possible to leave the country did so. Ballinasloe gradually became "a dirty filthy town with half-dressed people." In 1833 outbreaks of fever and smallpox occurred.⁵

With all these factors influencing the young Honoria, it was understandable that within her would be planted the seeds of social consciousness. Tradition states that she was "a woman of skill in organization and was noted for her charitable work."⁶ These talents were soon to bud forth. The year 1847 was a tragic one for the country from which the Irish emigrated and perhaps equally so for the place to which they came. In Ireland there were the effects of famine: starvation, poverty and disease. Many of the victims were rushed out of the country by their unscrupulous and often absentee landlords, notably Lord Palmerston.⁷ They were herded into the holds of ships, some of which were unfit for sailing, without adequate food or clothing. Fever (typhus) developed on board ship, and many died during their passage. Of those who survived – many of them orphans – their condition was abject, and most were listed as paupers.⁸

Immigration into Saint John had risen over the 3 years preceding 1847. In 1844, 2,000 Irish immigrants had arrived in Saint John; in 1845, 6,000 and in 1846 the number had risen to 9,000. In May 1847, 12 vessels arrived; in June 35, bringing 5,600 and another 4,000 came in July. While numbers seemed to have lessened somewhat from that time on, vessels continued to come to the port till November. When facilities for quarantine on Partridge Island, at the entrance to the harbor, could no longer handle all of

⁵ Tadhg MACLOCHLAIN, *Ballinasloe: A Story of a Community over the Past 200 Years*, Lower Salthill, Galway, 1971, p. 11.

⁶ [Sister M. Brendan Legere], *Laus Deo – 1854-1954, Centenary of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception*, Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, n.d., p. 20.

⁷ Lord Palmerston was at that time British Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister. His peerage lay in Sligo, Ireland.

Papers Relative to Emigration to the British Provinces of North America, 1847-1848 (1850), Vol. XLVII, *Report* of Dr. G.J. Harding, Health Officer, November 4, 1847, pp. 60-61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150. Resolutions passed November 10, 1847, by Common Council and Mayor of St. John, N. B.

the immigrants, some were brought into the city to the old poor house, or eventually, to hastily built sheds at various spots on the mainland.

Many of the emigrants “were of the class likely to become paupers at home, and were thus shipped to America in order to get rid of them.”⁹ It is estimated that 15,000 Irish immigrants landed on Partridge Island that summer and fall of 1847; about 800 had died on the voyage and another 600 died in the quarantine station. Unrecorded numbers succumbed on board of the ships as they lay in quarantine. Of those brought to the poor house hospital, the recorded number of deaths is 595. There is no record of the number of cases of fever and deaths from it, nor is there a record of cholera and smallpox cases which were also brought in. But in all, over 2,000 immigrant persons died in addition to those citizens to whom the disease was carried.

The first medical doctor to die was Dr. James Patrick Collins, who ministered to the stricken while they were in quarantine on Partridge Island. Other members of the medical profession, as well as the local clergy, brought as much physical and spiritual healing as possible.

One might have expected that after such a scourge, Saint John would have secured itself against any similar epidemics. Yet, when cholera re-appeared, as mentioned previously, with the coming of the “Blanche” in April 1854, no one was prepared for what was to follow. The vessel had set sail from Liverpool, having among the passengers a number of German immigrants. There had been deaths from the disease on the voyage and all were disembarked at Partridge Island. While only one death occurred on the Island, and that not till August, the passengers meanwhile were allowed to go into town; most lodged in the poorer parts of the city. Cholera cases appeared here and there; by June the number began to grow and then reached epidemic proportions, raging throughout July and August. It took even some of the medical men time to realize that cholera was contagious and that the very unsanitary conditions common in the city, and especially in the poorer areas, added to the spread of the disease.

Earlier, after the epidemic of ship fever in 1849, Bishop

⁹ W.K. REYNOLDS, “The Year of the Fever,” in *New Brunswick Magazine*, Vol. 1, July-December 1898, St. John, N. B., p. 212.

Dollard had written to the Secretary of the Association of the Propagation of the Faith that he had seen “as many as 700 poor people ... all lying in that dreadful malady, and although we were but five clergymen to visit them, not one of these poor creatures died until he had received all the consolations of our holy religion.”¹⁰ Noteworthy among the “five clergymen” was Father James Quinn of whom we shall hear again. Now, 1854 proved to be a repetition of 1847-1848. This time 1500 persons died. Connolly, having become bishop of Saint John in the meantime, encouraged his few priests once again in their attention and dedication to the disease-stricken.

Upon becoming bishop in 1852, Connolly had hoped to establish a sound educational system in his diocese and for this purpose had appealed to the Sisters of Charity in New York.¹¹ Now, even before the cholera epidemic died out, he took steps to care for the approximately 70 Catholic orphans by opening St Vincent’s orphanage in October 1854. A Protestant orphanage was set up in November, 1854, to care for 25-30 children.

THE BISHOP’S HOPES AND NEEDS

As always, the faith of Catholics must be safeguarded; this was the hope uppermost in the mind of Bishop Connolly when he decided to establish an orphanage for temporary shelter of the children. He received financial support almost immediately from private sources as well as from the Provincial Government. But money was not the complete solution in the project. The Bishop needed people who could provide loving care for these little ones. Here, Honoria Conway came to his assistance; but, even in the congregation that she founded for this purpose in October 1854, the annals have two versions of how this came about.

One version is that encouraged by Bishop Connolly Honoria Conway went to the Novitiate of the Sisters of Charity in New York, with the intention of coming back to Saint John to work for

¹⁰ PAC, Dollard to Secretary, Association for Propagation of the Faith, January 4, 1849, Microfilm, op. cit., #11244.

¹¹ SISTERS OF CHARITY OF NEW YORK, Minutes of Council Meeting, unpublished, October 11, 1853.

Bishop Connolly in his new venture, and to promote the education of the local children.¹² The second version, is that she went to the Novitiate with the intention of remaining with the Sisters of New York. While she was there, Bishop Connolly exerted considerable pressure on the New York superior of the Sisters of Charity, Mother Jerome Ely, to send some Sisters to Saint John. This the superior found impossible to do. Their numbers were small, and the health of the ones who might have come was inadequate for such an undertaking. Eventually, however, she allowed the Bishop to go directly to the novices and make his appeal with the promise that, if some of the young novices volunteered for the mission, they would be released from their obligations to the original congregation.¹³ Honoria Conway was the first to accept the challenge, and thus she became the foundress and first superior of the Sisters of Charity in Saint John, assuming the name Sister Mary Vincent, taking the vows of religious life October 21, 1854. She was accompanied by Miss Mary Routanne (Sister Mary Francis), Miss Mary Madden (Sister Mary Joseph), Miss Annie McCabe (Sister M. Stanislaus). Miss Bridget McSweeney also came from New York with them but withdrew because of poor health before taking vows.¹⁴

In the orphanage, the children received an elementary education, the older children helping in the manual work of the institution. According to the Bishop's plan, the majority were later adopted or apprenticed; a few returned to a parent or a guardian; and a very few were sent to the hospital or the almshouse. The orphanages were largely maintained on voluntary donations, though Bishop Connolly did obtain a grant of 226 pounds from the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly in 1855 to pay the balance of debt incurred in establishing the institution.¹⁵

In the almshouses there was no segregation as to health, age, and race; and, at one time in their history, the sexes were unsegregated. Promiscuity was common, and disease was an ever-present way of life. From an economical, as well as a humane point of view, this type of care was superior to the apprentice system – from

¹² SISTERS of CHARITY, New York, Minutes of Council Meeting, unpublished, October 14, 1853.

¹³ Unwritten Community Tradition.

¹⁴ [Legere], p. 18.

¹⁵ New Brunswick Journal of the Legislative Assembly 1855, p. 326.

which it had evolved – as better supervision was possible and some more glaring cruelties eliminated. In the almshouses a minimal education was provided for the children, and each inmate was kept busy as all who were able were expected to work in the upkeep of the establishment, either indoors or outdoors on the farm. However, it was far from ideal – or even satisfactory. The building itself had been hastily constructed in 1842 after the fire of 1839, and by now was deteriorating rapidly.

During the time Bishop Connolly was making his final appeal to the Sisters of Charity in New York, he was successful, also, in gaining the services of what his Vicar General, Father John Sweeney referred to as “The first Sisters to set foot in New Brunswick.” These were the Religious of the Sacred Heart from New York. Their Superior, Mother Hardey, was preparing to open a house in Saint John in 1855, for the purpose of teaching the children of the wealthy. By his impassioned plea, following the cholera epidemic of 1854, Bishop Connolly succeeded in convincing the superior that it was an obligation on her part to send Sisters immediately to care for the poor orphans. In words phrased in similar form to those of St. Paul to the Corinthians, he accomplished this. Bishop Connolly wrote the following to Madame Sophie Barat, the foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart in France:

Although it is not becoming to boast of services rendered, you will judge of my motive in mentioning that for three years I consecrated more than half of my time in looking after the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Halifax. I was chaplain, confessor, architect and business agent of the Ladies. It has pleased God to change the scene of my labors to the Bishopric of St. John. From the moment of my nomination I resolved, with the help of God, to secure for my diocese a community of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. On arriving there I was strengthened in my resolution by finding that at least eighty Catholic children of the most respectable families were attending Protestant schools. I succeeded in persuading the wealthiest parents to send their daughters to the Halifax school, promising them that within two years I would have a Catholic academy here. For this purpose I applied to Madame Hardey, and she graciously transmitted to me your answer, that in 1855 my desires should be realized. In the meantime it has pleased our Lord to afflict us with cholera; in the space of six weeks more than six hundred families were attacked by it – leaving seventy orphans on my hands.¹⁶

¹⁶ Quoted in *Mary Aloysia Hardey, Religious of the Sacred Heart 1809-1886*, with an Introduction by Reverend Thomas J. Campbell, S.J., America Press, New York, 1910, pp. 182-183.

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart arrived in September, 1854, and began the work that Sister Vincent and her band were to take up shortly afterwards, that is the care of the orphans. The Sisters of the Sacred Heart then opened an academy for boarders and day scholars.

As for Sister Vincent and her little group, Bishop Connolly drew up their first rule and presented it to them on the day they first pronounced their vows. As was to be expected, this rule has a strongly distinctive quality of the Franciscans – he, as we have seen, being a member of the Capuchins. There was, understandably, a leaning towards poverty, simplicity and joy.¹⁷

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE APOSTOLATE

On arriving in Saint John in the late summer of 1854, the future Sisters took up residence in a small rented house on Waterloo Street. This building was near the Cathedral, and here the Sisters took as many orphans to live with them as could be accommodated. During the first year they received and placed thirty-four girls. Later, in 1855, the Bishop gave up his residence to the Sisters, as the need for more space arose.

Sister Vincent, a frail woman for such a task, entered joyously into the work of organizing, preparing herself and her Sisters spiritually, and administering the growing community and orphanage.

Bishop Connolly laid rather stringent and rather awesome conditions for becoming a member of the group

All who wish to embrace the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity in the Diocese of Saint John, New Brunswick, must be animated with the desire to renounce every worldly object, to give glory to God, to save their own soul, to instruct and assist, and edify their neighbour; to build up and sustain, by every means in their power, that beautiful Church of God on the Earth, of which they ought to be the shining ornaments.

He adds:

¹⁷ T.L. CONNOLLY, *Rules of the Sisters of Charity*, October 21, 1854, Unpublished.

They must be devoted in an especial manner to the care of the orphan, and the instruction of the poor, and the attendance of the sick, even at the sacrifice of life itself.¹⁸

These words were not mere pious platitudes, nor sermonizings that he was unwilling to practise himself. History bears it out, as we have seen, that he nearly came to death's door while caring for the fever-stricken in his charge during his first sojourn in Halifax, and he was to repeat his courageous conduct in Saint John. A recent historian writes “. . . Bishop Connolly does emerge from the period as a man of unusual vigor in the crisis.”¹⁹ He was willing to leave his own house of residence to make a home for the Sisters and their charges. The Sisters gladly followed his exhortations. Some of the more frail of the group in the early years died prematurely, owing, in a large part, to the rigorous conditions under which they lived.

The Franciscan spirit inherited from Bishop Connolly carried with it a spirit of joy and simplicity, joined to an earnestness in a way of life that permeated the days of the early members of the new community and was left as a legacy to those of us coming after. In their life, they accepted everything as “coming from the Hand of God,” and this gave the Sisters a sense of security in all their hardships. Bishop Connolly's final injunction to the Sisters is pure Franciscan: the true Sisters of Charity must be

always happy, always content, always delighted with every duty, of her state, always thinking wonderfully of God and lowly of herself and charitably of everyone else. Always, and in all things, giving glory to God, edifying her Sisters, and the world with whom she comes in contact, always speaking in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles to the Father, and making melody in her heart to Jesus until He comes.²⁰

The Bishop encouraged the Sisters to strive for a strong com-

¹⁸ CONNOLLY, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Geoffrey BILSON, “The Cholera Epidemic in Saint John N. B. 1854,” *Acadiensis*, Vol. 4, #1, Autumn, 1974, p. 94.

²⁰ CONNOLLY, *op. cit.*

munity; toward this end they were asked not only to pray in common but also to develop a strong love for each member of the community:

While it is the duty of the Sisters to make the whole world love God, and be fond of virtue, she is charged in a more especial manner, to edify, to love, and to make happy her Sisters in Religion. If flesh and blood, and the mere instincts of animal nature, make Sisters love, and sustain, and comfort each other in the world, what should not Charity and Religion do, within the hallowed family of Jesus Himself? If it is the imperative duty of every Christian, much more must it be the heart obligation of every true Sister of Charity, to love one another as God loves us.²¹

Although the founder insisted on a faithful and accurate observance of the rule, he did not mean that it remain static and unchangeable; but rather, under certain circumstances, recommended activities that entailed lessening their strict observance, especially if this led to greater charity.

MOTHER VINCENT'S ASSOCIATES

Of the first three Sisters who accompanied Sister Mary Vincent into the congregation, two remained: these were Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph.

Sister Mary Francis (Mary Routanne) was a native of England and, in her early life, was a member of the Established Church. She became a Catholic during the Oxford movement, following the reading of the tracts published by the group. This was about the time of the conversion of the late Cardinal Henry Newman. Soon after this Miss Routanne moved to New York and later, according to tradition in the community, entered Mother Seton's Sisters of Charity at Emmitsburg. She taught in the parochial schools there for several years but felt further challenged in 1854, and, thus joined Sister Vincent when she came to Saint John. She became one of the first of our Sisters to obtain a teacher's licence in the Province of New Brunswick. She laid the foundations of one of the

²¹ *Ibid.*

first missions undertaken by the Community, St. Peter's in 1857. She apparently had a way with boys and young men. When she was leaving the Cathedral Parish for St. Peter's, the young men of St. Joseph's Society presented her with a chair, still a cherished relic in the Community. When Mother Vincent's eight years of office were over, Sister Francis became the second Superioress of the Congregation.

Very little has been written about Sister Mary Joseph (Mary Madden) but there is a tradition, passed along verbally, of her great holiness, and of her having travelled extensively in Europe and the United States, apparently in the role of a maid in the family of the noted American statesman, Daniel Webster. Her work in the Community seems to have continued to be that of "homemaker" for the Sisters and the orphans.

THE LIFE OF HUMILITY, SIMPLICITY AND CHARITY

The experiences of the little band in Saint John were closely interwoven with Mother Seton's original foundation in Emmitsburg, (through Sister Mary Francis) and with the Sisters of Charity on the Hudson (through the other original members of the Community). Their ideals and perspectives were formed in the same mould. Although there was a severance of association when the founding members came to Saint John, there always remained a bond of affection. This was strengthened by the ideals of a common purpose carried out under similar circumstances. Added to this is the fact that all the traditions in the new community evolved from the associations the founding members had had with their American counterparts.

Another bond developed with the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, who also had come from New York. Although these Sisters remained directly associated with the Sisters in New York upon their foundation in 1849, and although there was no direct association with the Sisters of Saint John, nevertheless they had common goals and similar experiences. After 1855 the Halifax Sisters also became independent. The daily common prayers developed by the Sisters in New York were used by both those communities until the post-Vatican II era when all three communities adopted the revised breviary.

The needs of the Saint John community in 1854 were simple. Their first purchases-made on August 11, 1854-were soap and

combs, costing 18 shillings. Obviously, cleanliness and hair care had priorities, not surprising in a city that was recovering from plague spread by its very filthiness. Only essentials in equipment and food were purchased. During the next few months knives and forks were purchased, candlesticks, tin pans, teapot, beds and cradles, these last two items costing 18 pounds. Only the simplest of food was purchased: bread, milk, meat, butter, rice, sugar, molasses, and flour. For personal needs they bought calico, flannelette, and cambric; soap continued to be a frequent purchase.²²

The Sisters' income was paid directly by Father Quinn, a member of the bishop's staff of St. Malachy's Chapel and later of the Cathedral. It was supplemented by the Christmas collections, by money from the Church's "poor boxes" and by whatever could be gained from making altar breads and doing work in the laundry and the occasional donation.²³

In spite of the austerity of their life, entailing, as it did, much manual work, the Sisters were not task-oriented; their work was but the expression of their care and concern for those in need. The first school was opened in the Cathedral Parish, in Temperance Hall on Sydney Street, later the site of St. Joseph's School after the fire of 1877 destroyed the Hall.

NEW FIELDS

Though their numbers were few – supplemented by new recruits over the next few years – the Saint John Sisters were able to send three members for a foundation in Portland, at that time a separate township but later the "North End" of Saint John, on June 3, 1857. This was done in spite of the ever-growing number of children to be cared for—sixty-two during the ten years in the original foundation.

Upon arriving in Portland, the Sisters set up a classroom in an old house, and the first day twenty pupils were enrolled. The house in which the Sisters lived was a rented one, old and dilapidated. It was built against the rock of Fort Howe, the rock as high as the house. As there were no near neighbors, it was a lonely situation.

²² Archives of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Community Accounts Book I, August 1854-December 1865.

²³ *Ibid.*, passim.

Near the house was a barn that had been used by the former occupant as a slaughter-house. The smell from this attracted many rats which entered the house and were frequently seen in the kitchen and refectory. Their noise was so bad at night that it gave the impression that the house was full of noisy people.²⁴

These conditions were most difficult but Bishop Connolly did his best to make the lot of the Sisters a happy one. Their first great joy was in receiving the Blessed Sacrament into one of the rooms, the Bishop having given them his own tabernacle. He ordered a new house for them and within a year and a half the Sisters moved into it. However, in the autumn of 1859 nearly the whole town of Portland was destroyed by fire, obliging many of the families to remove to Saint John. For a time after this the school enrolment was greatly depleted from the 250 to which it had risen in the two years since its opening. But the five Sisters stayed on and the children came back after the rebuilding of the town.

If the Sisters in Portland felt isolated, what must have been the sense of loneliness that enveloped the three Sisters sent nearly 300 miles away into the wilderness? On December 4 or 8, 1857, three of the Sisters opened a mission at St. Basile, Madawaska County, a few miles below Edmundston, in the midst of an almost totally French district. Preparations had been made for them by Father Hugh McGuirk, who soon after his arrival at St. Basile in 1857 had begun construction of a convent to be used as a boarding school and classrooms. The Chapel was attached, as well as large barns.

This establishment was made possible by a bequest of a large property to the episcopal corporation, for the setting up of a convent for the education of the young girls of Madawaska. The bequest was made by the Very Reverend Missionary Antoine Langevin, Vicar General to the Bishop of Saint John, who was Parish Priest of St. Basile at the time of his death.

The first Sisters to be missioned in this area were Sister Augustine, as superior, Sister Bernard "who knew a little French," and Sister Madeline. The following spring Sister Madeline was replaced by Sister Francis, who was accompanied by Sister Aloysius.

During the years the Sisters served in St. Basile, several of their students became members of the Congregation. However, the

²⁴ Archives, Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Notebook compiled by an unnamed Sister.

Common Schools Act, passed by the New Brunswick legislature in 1871, made all schools non-sectarian, a situation which the people of Madawaska refused to accept. This created a very difficult situation, since government grants, formerly made to denominational schools, were cut off and the people were too poor to maintain a private or parochial school. Mother James O'Regan, the Superioress, therefore, withdrew the Sisters in 1873.²⁵

ECONOMIC DEPRESSION: ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

For Bishop Connolly the year 1858 was a difficult one. An economic depression, begun in June owing to a slump in trade of lumber and shipbuilding, made his financial situation critical. He had been receiving some assistance from the Association for the Propagation of the Faith in Paris. But now he was instructed by the Association Secretary to pass on 1165 francs to the Bishop of Portland, Maine. Yet, there were no funds for his own diocese! He could not understand why his diocese had been cut off as a recipient of funds from the Society. In a letter to the Paris Secretary of the Association he explained that reports they had apparently received from an undisclosed source were false. With the exception of Portland, Maine, he said, New Brunswick was the poorest diocese in America: with a Catholic population of 80,000 with nearly 100 small churches in the woods, his entire source of personal revenue was 5000 francs which he had received from his priests over a two year period.²⁶

In 1859 Bishop Connolly wrote to the Secretary for the Propagation of the Faith as follows:

[there are] 27 Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, with five houses: three in Saint John, one in Fredericton, and one in Madawaska. There are 20 orphans with the Sisters, who have been snatched from the hands of Protestants, and who are maintained at our expense until such time as they can be placed with Catholic families in the country.²⁷

²⁵ Msgr. Louis Napoleon DUGAL, V.G., "Notice Historique sur l'Hôtel-Dieu de Saint-Basile, de Madawaska, N.-B., de 1873 à 1910."

²⁶ PAC, F 842, F 196a, Connolly to Ducros, June 15, 1858.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

This letter, written in French, makes one wonder at the title “Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul,” used here for the first time. Because of the French association of the name, it could have been a diplomatic ploy to create interest in the Community.

While the Bishop was having his difficulties, the financial status of the Sisters, however, became more secure in 1858 as they opened, in the tradition of Mother Seton and of the New York Sisters of Charity, a paying “select school for girls.” This venture eventually blossomed into the present St. Vincent’s High School, though today there is no longer a tuition fee.

Although the Sisters were admired for their sacrificing charity, they were also misunderstood. One Saint John woman, in her memoirs of the 1850’s gives the following tribute:

The Sisters of Charity had not only the best school for young ladies, but connected with the institution was a hospital for infirm or diseased children. This was a Catholic institution but patronized and financially aided by all classes of society and many of their daughters were educated in this school taught by the Nuns. As it was the only Infirmary in Saint John several cots held protestant children. And others without respect to creed were supported by Christian benevolence.

However, she ends on this note:

As I realize the sacrifice for Church and principle of these Sisters none aged, some quite young: shut out from society, relatives, friends, and all that they had known before and loved, I asked myself does our heavenly Father require this, or is only the despotic power of Man?²⁸

In 1858 another foundation was made, namely St. Dunstan’s Convent and School in Fredericton. Five Sisters were sent there for the new establishment: the Superior, Sister Stanislaus, accompanied by Sisters Mary Veronica, Mary John, Mary Lawrence, and Sister Mary Bernard, who had been withdrawn from St. Basile for this

²⁸ Archives New Brunswick Museum, Eliza DONKIN, “Martime Provincial Sketches,” unpublished manuscript, p. 45, S. Morley Scott Collection.

purpose. In the large, three-story building there were classrooms below and a Convent above.

A YEAR OF SEPARATIONS

In 1859, on the death of Archbishop Walsh of Halifax, Bishop Connolly was appointed to succeed him in that see. This year too saw the first three deaths in the Community: that of Sister Aloysius, a young Irish girl of 21 who had been in this country only a year, Sister Mary Agnes (Miss Michaud) and Sister Patrick (Bridget O'Toole), a sister of the future superior general, Sister Augustine O'Toole.²⁹ Bishop Connolly was succeeded in Saint John by Right Reverend John Sweeny, who continued the same paternal care for the Sisters and during his long reign of forty-one years eventually brought about the construction of the brick convent and orphanage on Cliff Street.

Just before the beginning of 1862, probably the first real heart-break occurred for the founding Sisters – and particularly Sister Vincent. This came about through the defection of Annie McCabe (Sister Stanislaus), who was one of “the first four.” In her withdrawal from the Sisterhood she was accompanied by two postulants a Miss O'Connor and a Miss Holt. In a letter from Bishop Rogers of Chatham to Sister Vincent we learn that these three women had gone in a public conveyance from the convent at St. Basile, clear across the Province in mid-winter. They were staying in a hotel in Chatham until the good Bishop secured room and board for them with a parishioner, the Widow Griffin. From there they began to negotiate with Bishop Rogers, in the hope of being accepted by him to teach in the schools of the area. The good Bishop felt that there would be danger of great scandal to the people in such unorthodox circumstances since they were recognized as Sisters of Charity from Saint John. He protected their image with the people, while reproving them in private.³⁰

In his correspondence with Sister Vincent, Bishop Rogers inter-

²⁹ Archives of Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Community Record Book, p. 3.

³⁰ Archives of Diocese of Bathurst, N. B., Bishop Rogers to Sister Mary Vincent, January 5, 1862.

ceded that she “accept them as prodigal children.” They seemed to be ready to return to the Community; but Sister Vincent considered it an impossible situation and thus replied that she did not wish them to be recognized as having any connection with her Community, and she would never acknowledge any one of them.³¹ She was ultimately supported in this decision by both Bishop Sweeny and Archbishop Connolly.³²

Shortly after these troubled times in 1862, Sister Francis succeeded Sister Vincent as superioress. A plateau seems to have been reached in the affairs of the Congregation and in local Church conditions. We learn from correspondence of Bishop Sweeny to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith that he had been the recipient from them of the sum of 8000 francs, making him more financially secure.³³ Although funds were still insufficient for all the demands, (the brick building was being built for the Sisters and orphans, as well as a large school house for the boys) after ten years in the apostolate the foundation was “well and truly laid” for the future years of service in God’s vineyard.

Thomas Connolly continued as Archbishop of Halifax until his death on July 27, 1876. As was fitting for a prince of the church, he was eulogized at that time in sermons, as well as in the secular press.

In the case of Sister Vincent – or Mother Vincent, as she had come to be known among the Sisters – death was as quiet as her life. Honoria Conway died at St. Vincent’s Convent on May 27, 1892, after many years of semi-retirement and finally two years of invalidism. The legacy she passed on was the Congregation she had founded and the work she had begun. She is buried in the old St. Mary’s Cemetery in Saint John, where a single plain monument lists her name with that of her Sisters buried around her.

Her only written memorial beyond an obituary notice is a sonnet written by her nephew, Charles Francis Donnelly; this was published in a small book of his verse and is included here:

³¹ Archives of Diocese of Bathurst, N. B., Sister Mary Vincent to Bishop Rogers, December 24, 1861.

³² Archives of Diocese of Bathurst, N. B., Connolly to Rogers, December 28, 1961.

³³ PAC, Microfilm, F. 842, F 196a, #12275, Sweeney to Association for the Propagation of the Faith, 11 September, 1864.

MOTHER VINCENT

(Obit May 27, 1892)

Proud Dover's castle thundered a salute
Of victory and vanquished France bowed low.
Then came the hush of peace to friend and foe –
And, then, while the embrasured fort stood mute
A child was born within, the blessed fruit
Of sacramental love, silent, to grow
To womanhood, and missioned to bestow
Sweet Charity; nor kin nor creed to moot.
And so she grew, and wafted to our shore
In modest preparation sought her way
To serve the Lord; nun-vestured then went forth
Among the poor, and blessings scattered while she bore
Herself with saintly mien; till came the day
When, summoned home, she upward passed from earth.³⁴

³⁴ Charles Francis DONNELLY, *Roma and Other Poems*, James T. White, New York, 1909, p. 8.