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# A short synopsis of the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead

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## *Part One*



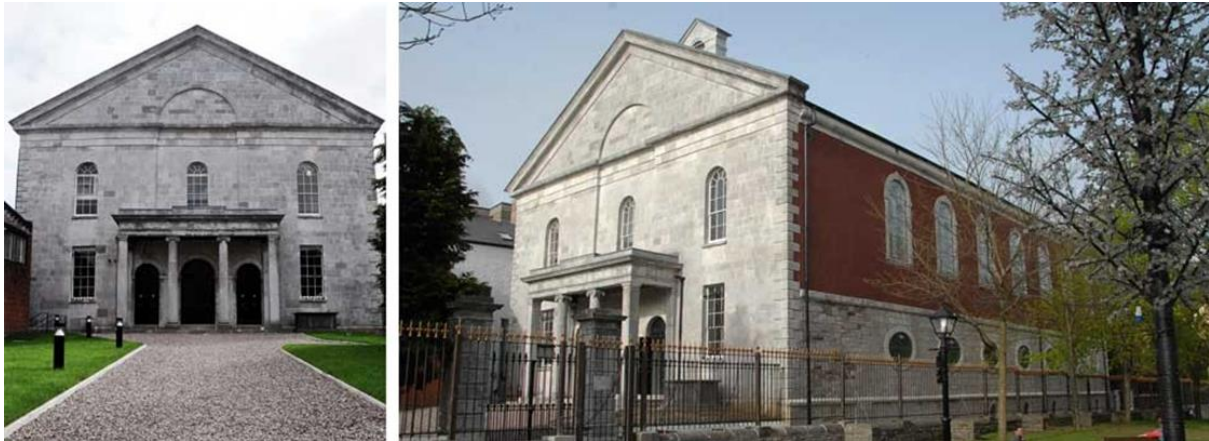
## **A short synopsis of the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead**

### **Mary's grandfather comes to live in Cork**

Sarah Atkinson tells us in her book, "Mary Aikenhead: Her Life, Her Work and Her Friends" which was published in 1882 that Mary's grandfather David, a Scottish gentleman, relinquished his military profession, married a Limerick lady, Miss Anne Wight and settled in Cork. David died early leaving two children, a daughter Anne, who afterwards married Dr. Galway of Cork and settled in Mallow and a son David who having studied medicine, established himself as a practising physician and chemist in Cork.

### **David Aikenhead's marriage**

The young David like his father, was a member of the Established Church of the time. We would call it the Protestant Church, the Church of Ireland or the Anglican Church. In due course David married Mary Stacpole, the eldest daughter of a Cork merchant whose family were staunch Catholics with strong national leanings. They were married on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1785 in a Cork church with a double-barrel name, Holy Trinity/Christchurch, situated in South Main St. In modern times that church became the keeper of the archives of Cork and in April 2011 it was opened as a concert hall under the title, Triskel/Christchurch, Triskel being the name of a small theatre next door.



### **Birth of Mary Aikenhead**

The Penal Laws introduced in 1695 forbade a Protestant marry a Catholic under penalty of losing his inheritance and his business and to borrow a phrase from a prominent politician of today, those laws had "not gone away you know" by 1785 but they had become partially relaxed and David Aikenhead suffered no penalty. However, before his marriage, he made one stipulation that whatever children heaven blessed them with, they should be brought up as members of the Established Church. So, on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1787 when the first child, a little girl was born to Mary Stacpole and David Aikenhead she was whisked off to her father's parish church, St. Anne's Shandon, Cork's Anglican Church where she was baptised



on 4 April 1787 and given the name, “Mary”. The baptismal font used at her baptism with the date it was made, 1629 clearly etched on the side, is still in use in the church today.

### **Mary is “fostered”.**

Soon after her birth, Mary Aikenhead was taken from Daunt’s Square where the Aikenheads lived, to be fostered by a Catholic nurse, Mary Rorke who with her husband John lived in a cottage on Eason’s hill, a semi-rural site quite near the top of Shandon hill.

We might ask ourselves why a child so young was taken so soon from her home? Some reasons have been proposed: **Firstly**, Cork city was built on marshy islands around which the River Lee wound its way on its journey to the sea. From about 1700 some of these marshes had been reclaimed to form streets. When Mary Aikenhead was born there were still many channels or canals in the city, some of them quite near low-lying Daunt’s Square. This position of the Square made it prone to damp and fog and this may have been a cause of concern to the parents of their new-born child. **Secondly**, and according to Donal S. Blake in his book, “Mary Aikenhead, Servant of the Poor”, Mary was, “quite frail, probably asthmatic, and according to the medical wisdom of the time it was decided to have her fostered in the more salubrious ground to the north of Shandon”. **Thirdly**, and here again I quote from Donal Blake: “It would appear that the young Mrs. Aikenhead was already having qualms about agreeing that all her children would be raised as Protestants and for that reason she handed her young daughter over to Mrs. Mary Rorke, a devout Catholic. Dr. Aikenhead, possibly wishing to humour his young wife, did not object. Perhaps he already had leanings towards the faith which he was to embrace on his deathbed”. **Fourthly**, a system of fosterage was practised in Ireland even from the time of the chieftains whereby a child was handed over to another family to be reared for a while and then brought back to the original family. Mary Aikenhead always referred to Mrs. Rorke as “Nurse”.

### **Life on Eason’s Hill**

Mary was cared for lovingly by the Rorkes and loved them as her second parents. A story is told that Mrs. Rorke had little Mary baptised secretly according to the rites of the Catholic Church.

Mary joined in the family Rosary every night before bedtime and accompanied the Rorke family to Mass every Sunday in the Bishop’s Chapel, as the church of the north parish was usually called. The present Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Anne is on that site. She played

with the children of the hill and got to know some of the adults too. On one occasion when her parents arrived on their weekly visit Mary ran to her father saying, “Oh! Father, I got such a fine supper of sprats from Joanie Keating; and now I want you to give me some medicine for her”. The doctor was well known on the hill for his many kind visits to the poor. The little girl was so happy, so well cared for and looked so healthy that it was decided to extend her stay on Eason’s hill indefinitely.

### **A glimpse of life in the City**

Mary made trips now and again to her home in Daunt’s Square in the city. These were followed by a walk on the Grand Parade where she met new friends. She was beginning to learn that there were two worlds in Cork – one up on the hill where most of the people were poor and went to chapel; the other down in the city where most were well-to-do and better dressed and went to church.



### **Mary returns to Daunt’s Square**

In 1793 when Mary was six years of age, it was decided it was time for her to leave Eason’s Hill and rejoin the family in Daunt’s Square. By this time there were two other little girls in the family, Anne born in 1790 and Margaret about 1792. A brother, St. John was born later, about 1796. To the delight of all, Dr. Aikenhead invited ‘Mammy Rorke’ to come and work full time in the nursery and ‘Daddy John’ to act as coach driver and general help. It was arranged that Mary would attend a nearby school established for the education of the children

of Protestant gentlemen and soon she began accompanying her father on Sundays, to service in Shandon Church.

### **1798 affects the Aikenhead family**



1798 was a memorable year in the Aikenhead household as well as in the whole of Ireland. From the early 1790s Dr. Aikenhead had become imbued by the principles of the United Irishmen. He subscribed to fair play in worship and employment for 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter.' On one occasion Lord Edward Fitzgerald disguised as a Quaker sought refuge in the Aikenhead home. He was

enjoying dinner with the family when the house was surrounded by troops with the sheriff at their head. After a few hurried but instructive words from the doctor, the visitor disappeared reaching safety across the river. The house was searched but because of the loyalty of his apprentices who knew and kept the doctor's secret, no incriminating documents were found among the drawers apparently filled with just medical prescriptions.

### **Dr. Aikenhead retires**

The strain was beginning to tell on Dr. Aikenhead. Already worried about matters of religion and the delicate health of his only son, St. John, the political fall-out from the 1798 rebellion began to affect him. He sold his practice and with his family retired to Rutland St. the home area of his wife's people, the Stacpoles. He was fifty years of age. Coincidental to this change of residence was the return to Ireland of Mrs. Rebecca Gorman, the widowed sister of Mary's mother. Mrs. Gorman was to have a profound influence on the young Mary Aikenhead.

### **Mary's spiritual struggle**

A struggle was going on in Mary's soul. On the one hand there was her father, whom she loved dearly and his well-to-do, good Protestant friends and on the other hand were the Stacpoles, in whose company, permeated as it was with the Catholic faith, she felt so much at home. She was living in a state of divided loyalty and, young



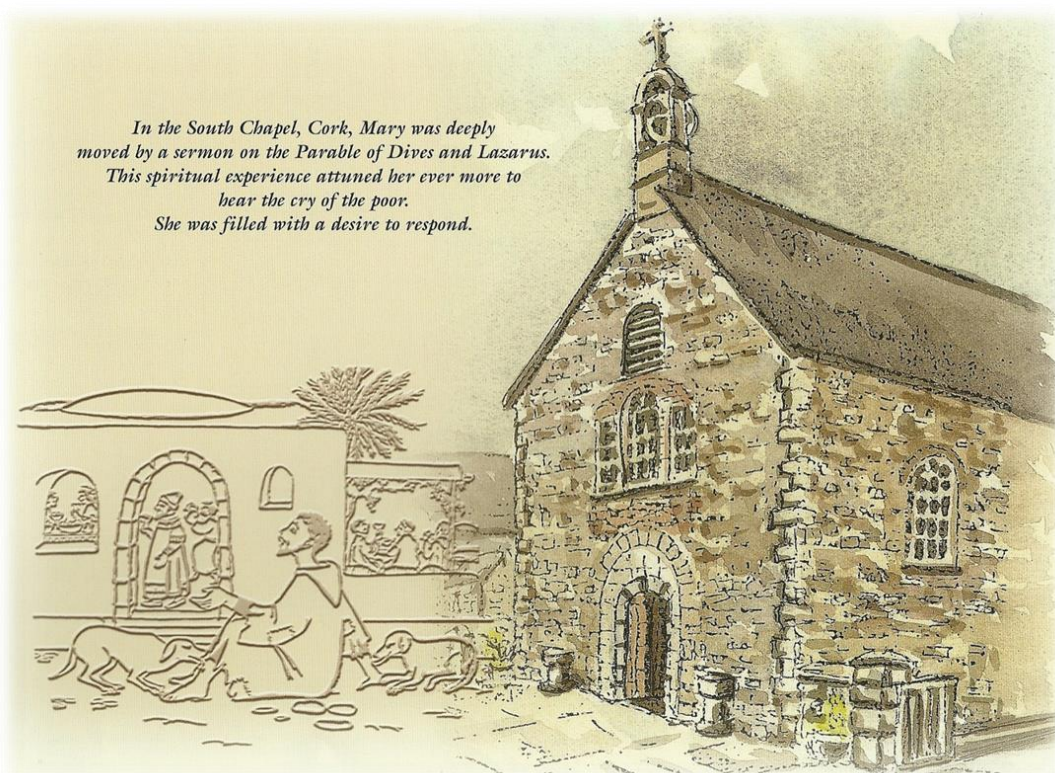
though she was, she realised that she must go one way or the other and that nobody but herself could make the decision. She began to slip out to early morning Mass in the nearby South Chapel and people in her household noticed that before retiring at night, “she burned down a whole mould candle while saying her prayers.”

### **The death of Dr. Aikenhead**

Dr. Aikenhead did not live long to enjoy his retirement. Towards the end of 1801 he became seriously ill. The minister from his church came and prayed with him. Later and of his own accord he asked to see a Catholic priest. His doubts vanished and he asked to be received into the Catholic Church. He died on 28 December 1801 while his family, Bishop Moylan a close family friend and faithful ‘Mammy Rorke’ knelt around his bed.

### **Dr. Florence McCarthy’s influence on Mary’s life**

Her father’s conversion and death cleared the way for Mary’s entry into the Catholic Church. About this time too, when Mary accompanied her aunt Mrs. Gorman to Mass in the South Chapel she heard a sermon by Dr. Florence McCarthy, Coadjutor Bishop of Cork, that was to influence her for the rest of her life. The topic was the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16: 19-31), the story of the uncaring rich man who ends up in hell and the crumb-begging poor man who inherits paradise. Mary applied the story to the Cork scene. She felt that she herself and her kind, the well-to-do had a gospel obligation to reach out to the thousands of poor, starving wretches who cohabited the city with them. The focus of the rest of her life was, to quote her own words, ‘God’s nobility, the suffering poor.’



## **Mary's reception into the Catholic Church**

Mary began to receive systematic instruction in the faith and on 6 June 1802, she was solemnly received into the Catholic Church at the age of 15. Her first Holy Communion followed on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 29 June and she received the sacrament of confirmation on 2 July. She took Frances as her confirmation name, probably in honour of Bishop Francis Moylan, and she was to use 'Mary Frances Aikenhead' on her copy of the vows many years later. Shortly after her confirmation, her younger sisters, Anne and Margaret and her little brother, St. John were also received into the Catholic Church.

## **Mary is obliged to learn business skills**

After the death of her father and because her mother was semi-invalided and unable to cope with business and financial affairs, Mary found herself learning how to keep accounts and transact business, skills that stood her in good stead in the years ahead. Her sisters, Anne and Margaret attended the school, run by the Ursuline Sisters while her frail brother, St. John was educated at home. Until she was twenty-one years of age, Mary took her place in society, entering into the round of social activities, balls and soirees that were part of Cork middle class life of the time. But she did not forget the destitute poor that tried to survive in the lanes of the city.

## **A bird's eye view of 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century Cork**

What was Cork like in Mary Aikenhead's time? It was a busy international port. Through this port beef, butter and grain from the hinterland were transported to feed the British armies in their European wars while in the miry lanes of the city, hordes of starving, ill-clad men, women and children tried to eke out an existence by hoarding and selling human waste. As the water supply for the poor came solely from the contaminated river, diseases such as



typhus fever were quite common. Into these lanes and into the grossly overcrowded, airless hovels ("airless" because windows were taxed and thereby generally boarded up) went Mary Aikenhead with her middle-class friends including Cecilia Lynch, bringing whatever help they could to ease the suffering of these unfortunate people.



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## *Part Two*





## **Mary begins to focus on religious life**

Mary began to think seriously of devoting her life full-time and as a religious to helping the poor in their homes but for the present she felt obliged to help her ailing mother in the management of the household. The Ursuline and Presentation Sisters, whose convents were nearby, were bound to enclosure. Even in the whole of Ireland at this period there was no convent that allowed its members to move outside the enclosure. When Mary discussed this with Cecilia Lynch, Cecilia informed her that she herself was joining the Poor Clares in Harold's Cross, Dublin.

## **An unexpected, life-changing meeting**



Then on 30 November 1807, when Mary was 20 years of age, a providential meeting took place at the Ursuline convent in Cork. Mary met Anna Maria Ball of Dublin, a wealthy woman in her own right who was married to a rich Dublin merchant, John O'Brien. She had come to Cork for the religious profession of her sister, Cecilia. Accompanying her was another sister, Frances or Fanny, the future founder of the Loretto sisters. Mary Aikenhead found that she had met a kindred spirit in Anna Maria. Mary already knew from her friend, Cecilia Lynch that Anna Maria devoted a great deal of her time in Dublin to the care of the poor and afflicted. Before leaving Cork, Mrs. O'Brien invited Mary to spend some time with her in Dublin. The invitation was gladly accepted.

## **Mary visits Dublin for the first time**

During the year following on Anna Maria O'Brien's invitation, Mary travelled to the capital and remained for a considerable time the guest of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien at their town residence, the lately-built Mountjoy Square. Here, Mary renewed acquaintance with the curate, Fr. Daniel Murray whom she had already met in Cork at the home of Cecilia Lynch and whom she knew as an ardent champion of the poor.

The journey from Cork to Dublin which, twenty years before took five or six days, had been shortened to a run of twenty-two hours by the newly-established mail-coach. People had begun to speak of the trip as if it were a mere afternoon ride. In 1808, the year of Mary's first trip to Dublin a new coach, lined with copper and advertised as bullet proof, was started between Dublin and Cork.



While in Dublin, Mary accompanied Mrs. O'Brien through back streets and lanes and up rickety stairs, bringing food for the body and comfort for the soul to the sick and poverty-stricken but she did not forget that the principal object of her visit to Dublin was to fulfil a promise made to Cecilia Lynch to visit her in the convent of St. Clare at Harold's Cross where she was a novice and to learn what was the spirit of that institute and what were the charitable works to which the community were devoted. However much Mary would have liked to join her friend Cecilia, she felt no attraction to the Order of the Franciscans.

### **Fr. Murray is now Mary's spiritual director**

Mary now consulted Fr. Murray on her spiritual affairs, relying implicitly on his judgment. He agreed entirely with her view that she could not conscientiously take the step she desired as long as she was so much needed at home. She returned to Cork and cheerfully resumed her old routine, not the less firmly resolved to dedicate her life to the service of God in the poor and not the less hopeful that a way would be opened to her at the right moment.

### **The death of Mary's mother**

Before long, an event occurred which brought sorrow into the home of the Aikenheads. Mary's mother became seriously ill and after three days of suffering died on 24 August, 1809. The family was broken-hearted. At the age of 22 Mary was now head of the family. She busied herself with the requirements of the will and with domestic requirements. Then in 1810 having ensured her siblings were well catered for, she availed of another invitation of Anna Maria O'Brien's to visit Dublin again.

A noteworthy event had taken place between Mary Aikenhead's first visit to Dublin and her second visit. Daniel Murray was now coadjutor bishop in the See of Dublin with right of succession, having been consecrated on the 30 November, 1809 by Archbishop Troy.

### **Bishop Murray mentally pinpoints Mary as a future founder**

One day, while Mary and Mrs. O'Brien were visiting Sr. Ignatius Lynch at St. Clare's, Sister Ignatius told them that Dr. Murray intended founding a congregation of Sisters of Charity and that he had proposed to her to remain disengaged until the foundation should be made, "but" added Sr. Ignatius, "not feeling up to the responsibility of a new order, I preferred remaining where I am." "Oh, Cecilia!" exclaimed Mary, "why did you not wait?" Mrs. O'Brien, struck with the earnestness with which Mary said these words, reported the incident to Dr. Murray. About



this time Mary's spiritual director in Cork, Bishop Florence McCarthy was visiting Dublin and one day when both bishops were discussing the projected foundation, Mary who was present, turned to her own bishop exclaiming: "Oh, my lord, when will you bring Sisters of Charity to Cork?" These words had the effect of strengthening Dr. Murray in his already formed opinion that she herself was the chosen instrument whom God would employ to carry out the work and he asked Mrs. O'Brien to endeavour to procure Mary's consent. Mary's reply was that if an efficient superior and two or three members undertook the work, she would certainly think, that in joining them she was doing God's will.

### **Mary welcomes Anna Maria to Co. Cork**

During the summer of 1810 while Mary was visiting her relatives, Dr. and Mrs Galway in Mallow, Mrs. O'Brien who had developed a cough that caused her friends considerable uneasiness, came to stay in Mallow for the benefit of the warm springs, Mallow at that time being a fashionable as well as a healthful resort. The spa waters, the balmy air, the picturesque Blackwater scenery and the pleasant company produced the desired effect and Anna Maria was able to say to her friends on her return to Dublin, "My cough is gone and I am quite myself again."

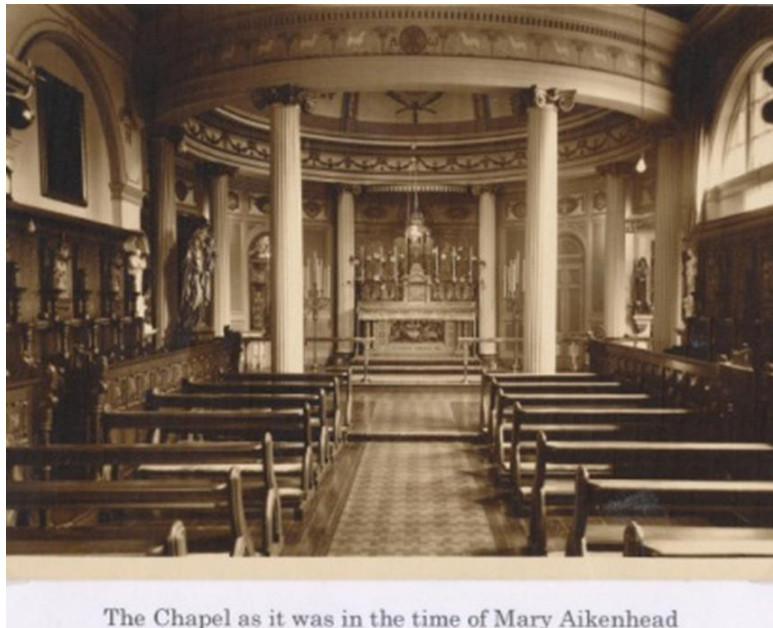
### **Bishop Murray "reveals" the future founder**

In the summer of 1811, Anna Maria O'Brien wrote to say that Dr. Murray thought that he had at last found a suitable leader for the proposed group of Sisters. Would Mary please visit Dublin to discuss this with him? With mounting excitement Mary travelled up to Dublin. She stayed with her friend in Mountjoy Square. Sure enough, Dr. Murray called around for supper. In answer to her eager question about the new leader for the project, the bishop intimated that she herself was the chosen one. Mary was dumbfounded. At first she refused, greatly underestimating her own gifts and abilities. When Dr. Murray assured her it was God's will, that she be the instrument in leading the new enterprise, she gave her consent but besought the bishop to procure for her, the advantage of experiencing a regular noviceship in an institute where the duties resembled, in some degree, those proposed to be carried out in the new foundation.

### **Micklegate Bar, York**

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Micklegate Bar, York, was thought to come nearer than any other to what was required. This Institute was founded by Mary Ward in 1609. The nuns made no vow of enclosure and went out to visit the sick. Their rule was based on that of the Jesuits founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Mary now busied herself making final arrangements of family affairs. On Trinity Sunday, 24 May, 1812 at the age of 25, she left her home in Rutland St., Cork and set out for Dublin where she met her companion Alicia Walsh, a lady about 14 years her senior. Archbishop Murray accompanied Mary and Alicia to York where they arrived on 6 June, 1812, the anniversary of the day Mary Aikenhead had been received into the Catholic Church. They were welcomed by Mother Elizabeth Coyney, the superior and Mother Austin Chalmers, the novice mistress, both of whom were to have a significant influence on the spirituality of the future Sisters of Charity.



The Chapel as it was in the time of Mary Aikenhead

### **The York Novitiate**

Mary and Alicia would have had as companions in the Novitiate for different lengths of time the following Sisters:

<b>Novice's name</b>	<b>Rel. name</b>	<b>Entered</b>	<b>Professed</b>
Rosetta O'Reilly (Dublin)	M. Gonzaga	x-x-1810	29-09-1812
Anna Maria Hevey (Dublin)	M. Bernard	15-11-1810	22-02-1813
Sophia Hines (Ireland)	F. Borgia	x-7-1811	09-12-1813
Mary Aikenhead (Cork)	M. Augustine	6-6-1812	01-09-1815
Alicia Walsh (Ireland)	M. Catherine	6-6-1812	01-09-1815
Jane Fitzgerald (Ireland)	J. Xaveria	x-9-1813	02-07-1816
Frances Ball (Dublin)	M. Teresa	8-9-1814	09-09-1816

Not only did Mary and her companion have the task of preparing themselves for religious life but they had the added one of trying to select a rule of life that would best suit their future congregation. They never assumed the religious habit of the IBVM but wore the plain black gown, cap and veil of the postulant. However, with permission, they took the religious names of, respectively, Sr. Mary Augustine (Austin) and Sr. Mary Catherine.

Mary and Catherine began to learn the principles of Ignatian spirituality. They studied the scriptures and the theology of the vowed life and took part in all the duties, without exception

assigned to the novices. Mary copied spiritual papers and translated books which seemed likely to aid her in her future station. They studied the rules and constitutions of the Congregation founded by St. Vincent de Paul. They looked at the Visitation rule of St. Francis de Sales but Mary's appreciation of the York rule daily increased from recognizing the spiritual advantages its practice brought to her own soul. Moreover, she saw nothing in the rule she was following that could clash with the exterior duties of charity, which she had in view for the new institute. During all this time Mary was in contact with Dr. Murray by letter and he with her through letters and actual visits. He agreed with Mary and Catherine that the York rule was the one most suited to the projected foundation.

When the year's novitiate was drawing to a close, Mary and Catherine besought Dr. Murray to grant them another twelve months' probation, to which he agreed. At his request Mother Coyney kindly allowed Mary make a copy of the rule and also of the constitutions of the York institute. Towards the end of the second year, Mary felt more than ever convinced, that she was not ready for the work before her. To her, it seemed useless to entreat another extension so she had recourse to silent prayer. We will see how her prayers were answered.

Dr. Murray had made known to Mary and Catherine that he intended taking them to Paris where they would stay with the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul for a few months, observing their work among the poor. Now, because of the political unrest in Europe in 1814, the year that heralded the last stand of Napoleon, their visit to France was ruled out. At the same time Dr. Murray was summoned to Rome to help in the Veto negotiations and Mother Coyney offered to keep the Irish Sisters in York until Dr. Murray should return. Mary must have quietly rejoiced that her prayers were answered.

### **The 'Veto Question'**

The 'Veto Question' involved the Vatican, the British Government and the Irish people. It proved to be a time-consuming task seeking to ensure that the British government did not succeed in obtaining from Rome a veto i.e. the right to refuse to sanction the appointment in Ireland of any proposed Catholic bishop that the British felt was politically incorrect. The Holy Father, Pius VII had felt under an obligation to allow England the Veto because England had helped him return to the Vatican from exile.

### **North William Street convent**

On his return from Rome to Dublin in February 1815 the bishop set about enlarging the house and adding a chapel to the establishment in North William Street that he had accepted from the Trinitarian Orphan Society. It had been offered to the Sisters of Charity on condition they cared for the fourteen orphans therein.

## **Return from York**

Leaving Dublin on 13 August Dr. Murray arrived in York on the 18 August to bring home after almost three years and three months Sisters Mary Augustine and Mary Catherine. They left York that very day and on 22 August 1815 with a favourable wind, they sailed into Dublin bay. On the following day the Irish bishops requested Dr. Murray return immediately to Rome to make known to the Sovereign Pontiff that neither they nor the people of Ireland would ever accept the Veto in exchange for Catholic Emancipation.

## **Profession**

Dr. Murray desired the Sisters to prepare at once by a retreat of three days for their first profession of vows, which then took place on 1 September. On that day Dr. Murray nominated Sr. Mary Augustine Aikenhead, Superior-General and Sr. Mary Catherine Walsh, Mistress of Novices. On 3 September he received the first postulant, Catherine Lynch of Drogheda and on the 7<sup>th</sup> he departed for Rome having placed the Sisters under the special care of Fr. Kenny, S.J. During Dr. Murray's absence the community in North William St. increased by four or five new members.



## **Rescript of Pius V11**

Dr. Murray returned from Rome on 23 March 1816 bringing with him the Rescript of Pope Pius VII authorising the establishment of a congregation of Sisters following the rule of the Convent of York with the addition of a fourth vow of Service of the Poor. On 10 September, 1816, Mary and Catherine began the visitation of the poor in their homes and for the first time in Ireland religious were seen engaged in this work outside their convents. On that same day in Cork Mary's brother, St. John died aged about nineteen years.

## **'Work increasing, hands lessening'**

In 1818 Sr. Mary Teresa Lynch, the first who had entered the new convent, died three months after her profession. A few months later, Sr. Mary Magdalen Chamberlain died. The work was increasing on every side while the hands were lessening. Rev. Mother met the emergency by doing the duty of several offices. She was Superior; she was Novice Mistress in place of Mother Catherine who wasn't suited to the work; she went on the sick mission and on her return would take up the duty of an ailing or absent sister; oftentimes she cooked for the community; she dealt with callers; she was in constant attendance on sick sisters; for a month previous to the death of Sr. Mary Teresa Lynch she sat up with her every night, allowing herself little or no rest during the day. At length the strain of over-work began to show

towards the end of the summer of 1818 and the doctor who was consulted expressed concern about her lungs and heart judging that complete rest and change of air were necessary for her recovery. When Dr. Murray added his voice to that of the doctor Mary agreed to rest. Anna Maria invited her to recuperate in her country home, Rahan Lodge in Co. Offaly.

### **Rest in Rahan Lodge**

While in Rahan Mary met Fr. Robert St. Leger S.J., Rector of the nearby Jesuit College who agreed to take on for her, the task of writing constitutions based on the rule of St. Ignatius and of providing a detailed system for training the novices. After about two months Mary Aikenhead returned to North William Street strengthened in body and soul.



### **Mary's sisters**

What about Mary's two sisters, Anne and Margaret? Margaret married a Dr. Hickson and lived in Killarney. She was to be widowed young and left with three children in 1836. She outlived Mary, dying in 1874. Anne entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity in 1822 and as Sr. Anne Ignatius came to Cork in 1826 as a member of that new community. Sadly, Anne was stricken with the dreaded typhus, was recalled to Dublin, developed consumption and died in Stanhope St. convent in 1828. She is buried in the crypt of the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin. She was thirty-eight years of age.

### **A second bout of illness**

For the next twelve to thirteen years after her return from Rahan, Mary was extremely busy overseeing the fledgling congregation, devoted to the training of the novices and attending to the thousand and one tasks that the founding of new convents entailed and all without a holiday. Towards the end of 1830 it was apparent that her health was failing. A doctor was called in who made the alarming diagnosis that 'internal cancer' was the problem. His remedy was a series of physical exercises although Mary found it almost impossible to walk and he prescribed a course of dangerous drugs. The chemist who made up the prescriptions became alarmed and refused to 'poison Rev. Mother'. At Anna Maria's suggestion, Dr. Joseph O'Ferrall, a prominent Catholic doctor was called in. He discovered that Mary Aikenhead was suffering from inflammation of the spine which had been greatly aggravated by the severe treatment.



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## *Part Three*





### **Mary is permanently invalidated**

There was to be no full recovery for Mary. At the age of forty-four, she, who had been so active in the work of the Lord, was permanently invalidated. From now on and for twenty-seven years, she was to guide and govern her congregation from a sickbed, mainly by her pen. The brief of Gregory XVI dated 30 August 1833 giving final approval to the constitutions of the Sisters of Charity must have been a welcome relief to the suffering invalid.



### **Mary challenges the “Commission on Poverty”**

Mary Aikenhead was never lacking in courage but especially when she saw the poor being unjustly treated. She gave evidence to a Royal Commission on Poverty established in Dublin in 1833. She described the scale and depth of the destitution she and her colleagues had encountered for years. I quote a few sentences: “Many in the prime of life are reduced to debility from want of food, without sufficient clothes to cover them... We found many in the agonies of death without the means of procuring even a drink and many perished without medical aid... The lanes and streets are filled with filth... there are no sewers... the poor must buy even the water they drink; it is of the worst description and tends to promote disease, as much by its scarcity as by its poor quality.”

### **Elizabeth Bodenham arrives**

The cross under different guises was never far from Mother Mary Aikenhead’s door. Elizabeth Bodenham (1787-1859) was a member of an English Catholic aristocratic family who could name among her relatives a Cardinal, a Bishop and two Jesuit priests. She herself had been educated in France, was accomplished in Bible studies and Church history and was the author of a number of pious books. Mary, although somewhat unsure of her suitability, decided to give Elizabeth a chance and admitted her to the novitiate. In 1830 she was professed taking the name, Sr. Mary Ignatius. It was shortly after this that Mary’s own health began to deteriorate and she appointed Sr. Ignatius to give catechetical instruction to the novices.

### **Three Sisters sent for training to Paris hospital**

Mary Aikenhead had set her heart on establishing a great hospital in which the sick-poor should receive all the aid the doctor’s skill could provide and all the comforts that the Sisters

of Charity could provide. In 1833 she sent three Sisters, including Sr. Ignatius Bodenham to the Hospice de la Pitie in Paris to be trained in nursing and hospital management. They arrived back in Dublin on the feast of St. Aloysius, 21 June, 1834. Sr. Bodenham referred to the St. Vincent's Hospital project as, "a little pious hallucination of Rev. Mother's" and she felt that it never would – or should get off the ground. She tried to persuade some of the Sisters on her return to Ireland that hospital work was a species of labour unfitted to refined and educated women. As it happened, the hospital in St. Stephen's Green was not ready for occupancy when the three Sisters returned and Sr. Bodenham was assigned once again to helping out in the novitiate.

### **Sr. Ignatius Bodenham appointed Mistress of Novices**

With her increasing involvement in the preparations for the opening of St. Vincent's Hospital and with her own precarious health, Mary realised that a new Mistress of Novices was required. In her dilemma she turned to Sr. Ignatius who was already familiar with the workings of the novitiate. She had a personal charm and a facility in discoursing on spiritual matters and, besides, the novices liked her. So, Sister Ignatius Bodenham succeeded Mary Aikenhead in the novitiate and Mary Aikenhead continued with her preparations for the opening of the new hospital.

### **Preparations for the new hospital progressing**

Having purchased some linen, Mary "began to cut out and arrange the various articles that would be required. She thought herself grandly provided when she could count thirty pairs of sheets and an equal number of bolster and pillow slips as the beginning of the future wardrobe. The bolster and pillow slips she made with her own hands as she reclined on her bed in Sandymount."

### **Trouble in the Novitiate**

It wasn't until a year later and a month after St. Vincent's Hospital opened in 1834 that Mary sensed all was not well in the novitiate in Stanhope St. Three postulants were to receive the religious habit in May 1835 but the ceremony was being arranged on a lavish scale, quite foreign to Mary Aikenhead's thinking. Mary cancelled the programme. Under Sr. Ignatius, the novices were led to believe that in working for the poor they were wasting the talents God had given them. She had even urged that they press for an election of a new Superior-General. She was removed from the charge of the novices.

### **Elizabeth Bodenham dismissed**

Not long afterwards it emerged that Sr. Ignatius had already made arrangements for a foundation in Hastings, England to which she would take the most gifted of the novices to

open a school for the well-to-do. Mother Aikenhead lost no time in cancelling the arrangements for the new foundation. But thirteen of the twenty-two novices and two professed Sisters left Stanhope Street. Mary called a meeting of her Council and the decision that was arrived at was that Sr. Ignatius should be dismissed. In August 1837 Elizabeth Bodenham left for France.

### **Mary Aikenhead's Letters**

During her Religious lifespan, Mary wrote many letters, mostly to Sisters of Charity. Some were serious, some spiritual, some playful as when she says, "We have a real treasure of a zealous, kind chaplain here who hears the great big men's confessions before and after breakfast; so he is worth a good egg." She had just received a basket of eggs from Cork. The "great basket" as Mary calls it appears to have done a



lot of sailing in the little steamer the Inisfail, up and down between the two convents. If Cork eggs were valued in Dublin, Dublin bacon appears to have been a great treat in Cork. The following is an excerpt from a letter Mary wrote on 3 January 1837 to Sr. M. de Chantal, when trying to raise funds for St. Vincent's Hospital: "I had to get out all my begging notes, 3,000 general ones, such as I send you to look at and 500 of neater paper folded in envelopes. The fruit of this begging amounts to £35. In order to have all delivered on Christmas Eve we had to employ 18 persons... and as I had to arrange all parcels of notes to be delivered by each person, I did not lie down to sleep the night before until 3 o'clock in the morning."

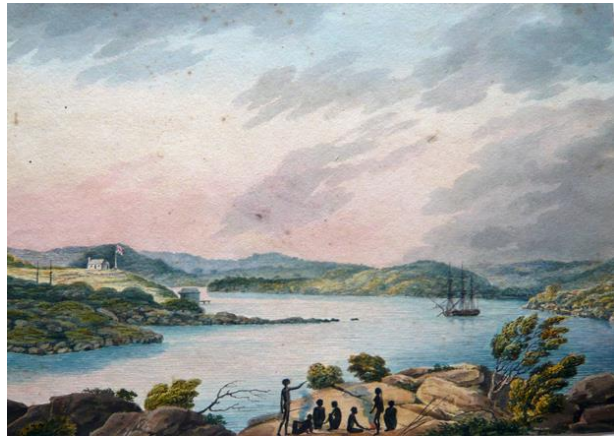
With the passage of the years, Mary was in constant pain and unable to raise her head and her fingers became increasingly arthritic. She sometimes wrote lying down. Sometimes at the cost of great pain she sat up and wrote on a little bed-table. Her arm had to be lifted for her on to a pillow and her quill pen put between her fingers. Over one thousand of her letters are in the possession of the Sisters of Charity.

### **Australia calling**

In 1834 Dr. Polding, OSB, Archbishop of Sydney called on Mother Mary Aikenhead requesting her to send some Sisters to the female convicts in New South Wales, Australia. She promised to do her best for him before his next visit to Europe in a few years' time. True to her word, on the arrival in Ireland in 1837 of Dr. Polding's Vicar General, Dr. Ullathorne, OSB, Mary, in spite of her depleted numbers asked for volunteers. When the group of five were ready Mary, despite her physical disabilities accompanied them to Dun Laoghaire

harbour on 12 August, 1838 whence they set sail on the first stage of their voyage. Mary was heard to say, “I would gladly join the party if I were younger and in health”.

On 18 August, Dr. Ullathorne’s party consisting of four priests, three seminarians and five Sisters, John Cahill, Baptist de Lacy, de Sales O’Brien, Lawrence Cater and Xavier Williams set sail from Gravesend, England on board the sailing vessel, “Francis Spaight” arriving in Sydney on 31 December, 1838 four and a half months later. It was mid-summer in Australia. Nine years later in 1847 at the



request of Bishop Willson of Tasmania, three of those Sisters, John Cahill, de Sales O’Brien and Xavier Williams sailed in the “Louisa” towards Tasmania, arriving in Hobart at the end of six days.

### **Mary’s health deteriorates**

In the early 1840s Mary’s health deteriorated rapidly. In the winter of 1844 she suffered from frequent attacks of bronchitis. This, added to her other maladies, left her very weak. Change of air became absolutely necessary. A house in Harold’s Cross came on the market and on 11 September 1845 Mary moved from St. Vincent’s where she had lived for 11 years to Our Lady’s Mount. She was 58 years of age and here she was to remain for the rest of her life.

### **Bereavement for Mary**

During the 1850s Mary was to mourn the loss of some of those who had assisted her in the foundation of the Sisters of Charity. Archbishop Murray died in 1852; Miss Matilda Denis, the principal benefactor of North William Street convent died in 1854 and on Christmas Day of that same year, Mother Catherine Walsh, Mary’s companion in York died. In June 1857, to quote Donal Blake, “Yet another strong link with the past was broken by the death of Fr. Robert St. Leger, SJ.” Mary’s spiritual director in Cork, Bishop Florence McCarthy, had died on 19 June 1810, having contracted a virulent fever while attending a victim. He was forty-nine years of age.

### **Mary Aikenhead’s last signature**

Mary’s last official act was to accept from Fr. Daniel Jones SJ, the deeds of his home, Benada Abbey, Co. Sligo which he had inherited. The agreement was signed on 4 April, 1858, the

last document to receive her signature. Mary had been responsible for fourteen foundations during her religious life.

### **Mary's last days**

In addition to her previous maladies symptoms of dropsy appeared in 1858. Her heart was affected and gradually the spinal muscles became too weak to support the head. She died at 3 o'clock, 22 July, 1858.

After the Requiem Mass in Donnybrook chapel, a deputation from a body of Dublin working men begged as a favour, that they might be allowed to carry her remains to their final resting-place in Donnybrook cemetery.



### **A Nation in mourning**

There were lengthy obituary notices in some of the national papers following the death of Mary Aikenhead. The following is an extract from the **Cork Examiner**, “We have to announce with deep regret the demise of this true Servant of God...The Sisters of Charity have lost a mother indeed whilst the poor have been deprived of a universal friend and the cause of charity of a zealous and successful advocate...even to the last moment of her sainted existence the noble minded Sister of Charity never forgot for an instant the objects of her pious mission on earth ...the poor...whom she devotedly loved and cherished.”

In “**The Tablet**” published in Dublin we read, “...rarely have those virtues (female piety, charity and zeal) been more happily united, than in the person of Mother Mary Augustine, or more edifyingly exemplified than they have been in her holy life and never-to-be-forgotten efforts in the cause of benevolence and piety.”

The writer of an article in “**The Nation**” published in Dublin, having alluded to the heroism displayed on the battlefields of the Crimea goes on to speak of the heroism of “the lately deceased foundress.”

“Let us, however, turn to heroism of a truer and purer type; let us bow the head and bend the knee by the bier of one who has been the victor in another and a holier field; whose glory and reward will endure when the conquests and the kingdoms and the empires of this world shall have passed away for ever.”

Extract from a letter of **Most Rev. Dr. Gillooly, Bishop of Elphin:**

*“...I learned of the death of your pious and gifted foundress...There were few living saints for whom I had so much esteem and very few departed friends for whom I have prayed with so much fervour, although I feel perfectly confident that her soul was already perfectly purified by trials and sufferings before death and that she was immediately admitted to her reward.”*

Let us continue to pray that one glorious day we will see Mary Aikenhead raised to the altars of the Church.

Sr Miriam Twohig RSC

January 2013

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