

THE LIFE AND WORK
OF MOTHER FRANCIS MURPHY
FOUNDRESS OF
THE FRANCISCAN SISTERS
MINORESS



HAVE FAITH

HAVE FAITH

BACKGROUND

In order to understand and appreciate the charism which was given to Mother Francis Murphy, Foundress of the Franciscan Minoress Sisters, one has to go much further back in history than 1888, which is the date when she left the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, the Congregation of which she had been a member for eighteen years. When she came to London in 1870, to become a postulant in the newly founded Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, the Catholic Church in England was only just getting back on its feet after three centuries of persecution. The Catholic Hierarchy had only been restored in 1850 and was facing important decisions and plans in order to re-establish Catholic life among the people. Christianity had been practised in England since the Benedictine monk, Augustine, had been commissioned by Pope Gregory the Great, in 596, to gather forty men, cross Europe on foot, sail across the English channel, and convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, without knowing their language. Despite many difficulties the monks crossed the English Channel and landed on the island of Thanet, a point now marked with a cross. Augustine sent a message to Ethelbert, king of Kent, telling him that he had come from Rome, bringing good news for all his people. The king sent back an answer telling Augustine to stay where he was and bidding the people of Thanet to supply the monks with food and all things necessary. Some days later Ethelbert came to Thanet and conferred with Augustine. The king gave them a dwelling-house in Durovernum (CANTERBURY) which was the capital of his kingdom of Kent, and allowed them to "sing, pray, say Mass and preach in the church of St. Martin." They proceeded to do just that and on the Easter Vigil (600) Augustine baptised the king himself at St. Martins Church.

From this time onward the king encouraged his subjects to become Christians. Augustine and his monks quickly won the hearts of the people because they led lives of simplicity, poverty and hard work.

Augustine crossed over to France to be consecrated bishop by one of the French bishops and on his return to England became the first Bishop of Canterbury, using the church, which he and his monks had restored, as his See (or seat). Augustine died in Canterbury about the year 605 and was proclaimed a Saint in Christianity continued to spread throughout England until the sixteenth century when, in 1534, by an Act of Parliament, king Henry VIII, who had been baptised and educated as a Catholic, rejected and refused to recognise or obey the authority of the Pope and repudiated everything that he had known, believed and practised as a Catholic since his youth. He tried everything he could think of and do, to stamp out the practice of the Catholic Faith in England. Moreover, he made himself Supreme Head of the Church in England, and it was regarded as treason, punishable by imprisonment and death, to be, and act, as a Catholic. Many thousands of English people became martyrs for the sake of their Catholic Faith.

During the eighteenth century, the handful of wealthy people that remained loyal to the Church settled down to live quietly in their country houses, many of them in the north of England, far from London's control. They sent their children to be educated in Catholic schools in Europe. They kept a chaplain to say Mass for their families and servants, in their private Chapels (Eastwell) and other Mass centres around Melton

and Blessed Nicholas Postgates life) They maintained the Faith quietly, without any show or with the intention of attracting attention, asking only to be able to worship and serve God in peace.

By the end of the eighteenth century, after almost 300 years of persecution, there were signs of a change. In 1778 a Catholic Relief Act was passed in the English Parliament, repealing (revoking, cancelling) the penalty of life imprisonment for priests, but even this small gesture of justice caused a violent reaction, resulting in the Gordon riots.

In 1791 a further measure of relief was allowed. The building of Catholic Churches was allowed, and they went up steadily, four hundred of them by 1829. They were all plain buildings, with plain glass windows. No steeple or bell was allowed. Then, in 1829, after many unsuccessful attempts, the CATHOLIC EMANCIPATION BILL was passed into law, largely due to the campaign of Daniel O Connell, the Irish liberator, whom the electorate of Clare, in Ireland, insisted on returning as their member of Parliament, although he was disqualified from sitting in Parliament, by his religion.

Now, for the first time in two and a half centuries, English Catholics could sit in Parliament and take their place openly in the life of their country. The "old" Catholics – as those who had maintained the Faith in England were known – responded cautiously to their new freedom, but a new element now began to enter the Catholic Church in the shape of converts from the Church of England (which by 1829 had been in existence for almost 300 years). The Anglican (English) Church had been shaken up from a period of lethargy in the eighteenth century by two powerful movements of spiritual renewal; one, the Evangelical movement, concentrated on personal piety; the other, known as the Oxford Movement, because its leaders were at Oxford University. The latter were trying to restore what they believed to be the Catholic heritage of the Church of England. Its leaders were John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Edward Pusey, and they made their views known by publishing a series of TRACTS, which are short treatises, written in a methodical way, about a subject especially on a religious subject.

In an attempt to explain the Articles of Religion in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, in a Catholic sense, Newman published TRACT 90, which immediately aroused a storm of indignation among those who thought he was betraying the principles of the Reformation

Newman resigned his position at the University of Oxford, and after four years of agonised meditation and consultation, was received into the Catholic Church in 1845. Newman was followed by many fellow members of the Oxford movement. They brought a much-needed element into Catholic life, as they were for the most part men of high intelligence and of scholarship with a breadth of culture from which Catholics had for a long time been deprived. They proved to be the forerunners of a steady stream of convert Anglicans, many of whom were clergymen.

The old Catholics and the converts were comparatively few in number. The greatest contribution to the astounding growth of the Church in nineteenth century England was the stream of immigration from Ireland. Especially after the disastrous potato famine of 1846 and 1847, crowds of starving and destitute Irish were driven to earn

what living they could in the factories and fields of Britain. Irish immigrants filled whole areas of the poorer quarters of English industrial towns, Nottingham being one of them. Although some lost their Faith, the great majority preserved it with splendid tenacity, keeping a firm hold on it!

From their scanty wages they saved enough for simple churches and schools.

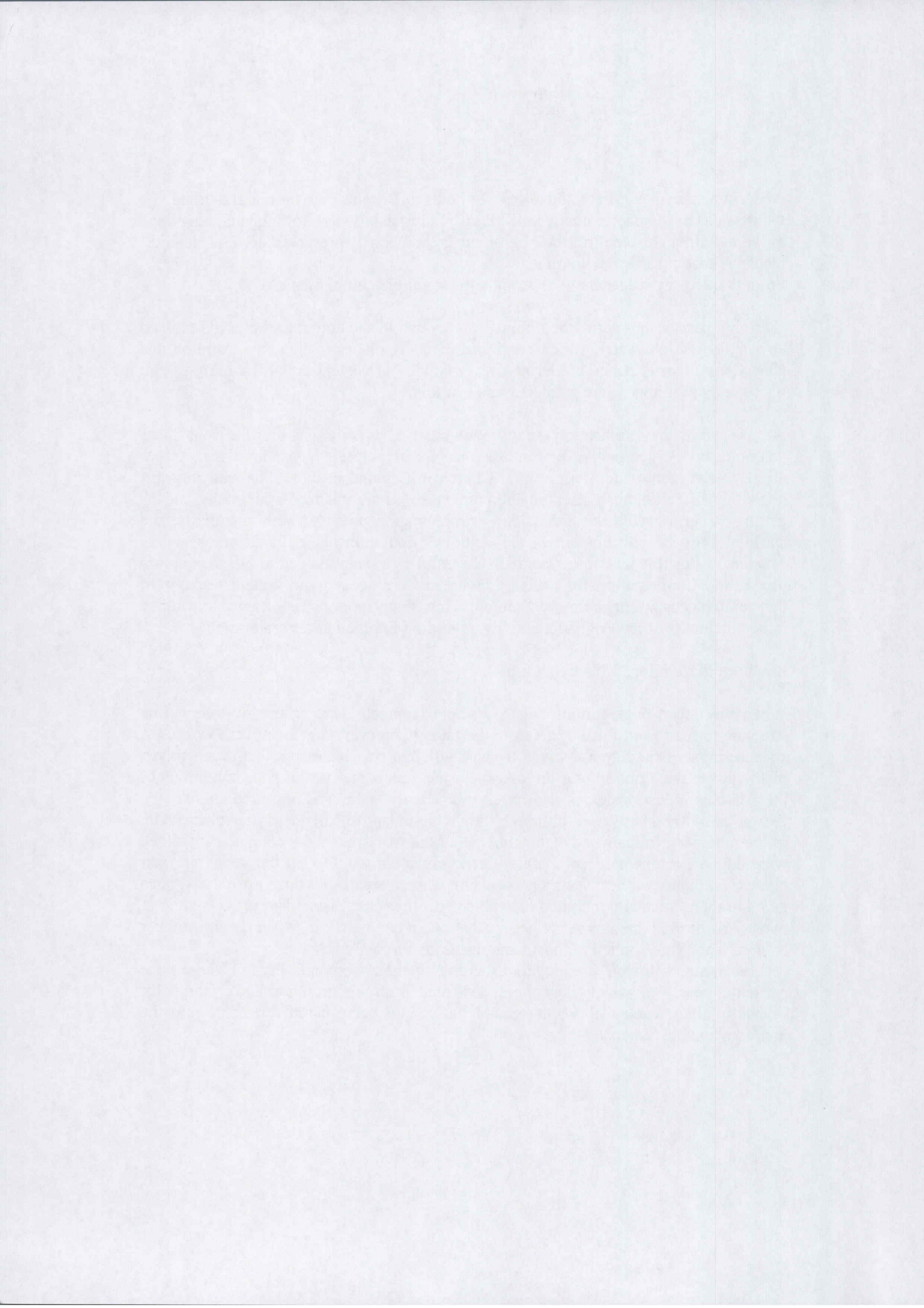
Thriving parishes grew up, their churches crowded to the doors. Catholic life took on an Anglo-Irish character, which continues in many places to this day. Alfreton and Clay Cross, two Parishes in Derbyshire in which our Sisters are still working, after many years of ministry, are great examples of this.

A few words of explanation about how most Sisters in Religion, except those belonging to Contemplative or Enclosed Orders, lived their day today lives. As has already been mentioned, the Catholic Church in England in the 1980s was only just beginning to re-establish itself in the country by re-organising its hierarchy and by getting to grips with the tremendous problems of poverty, both materially and spiritually, of the vast number of the Catholic population of England, but especially London. For this task to be tackled successfully or even tackled at all, many more priests and Congregations of Religious women were needed and Ireland was one of the chief places where help was sought. Thus many young Irish men and women joined the ranks of the English hierarchy, regarding England as a mission field.

Structure of Religious Life at that time.

When the new Congregations began, in approximately 1865, there was very little structure to the form of life, apart from the time given every day to spiritual exercises, because most of the day was given to works of charity. This meant that the members of the group were out among the people in the streets and in the poor conditions of their homes. Most Rules of Life were written by men, and imposed on women Religious by the clergy, and although they were meant to safeguard the spiritual life of the members, in many ways they hampered the work that these courageous women were doing. For example, to begin with these women would visit the people in their homes, on their own because their numbers were so small, but once a Rule had been given to them it usually included one which specified that Sisters had to go visiting in twos. This limited the number of people that could be visited; in fact it cut the number by half! This Rule applied in most Congregations for many years.

As the numbers in the Congregations grew, so their Convents became larger; the particular needs to which they were dedicated e.g. a boarding school, Home for orphans, fallen women or whatever and the people being cared for, came into the premises and the Sisters



MOTHER FRANCIS MURPHY 1843 – 1927

Margaret Murphy – Mother Francis – Foundress of the Congregation entitled Franciscan Sisters Minoress since 1913, but previously known as:-

Sisterhood of St Francis (1898)
Missionary Franciscan Sisters (1900)
Franciscan Tertiary Sisters (1903).

Margaret Murphy was born at Crossabeg, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland on 29th March 1843.

The sisters who knew Mother Francis gathered that she had been educated at home, in Crossabeg, sharing a Governess with her three sisters. What were the circumstances in the farm where they lived that this should have happened, for surely it was an unusual thing for farm children to have a governess in 1850 or thereabouts? It was evident to the Sisters who were later her companions in Religion, that there was a deep religious atmosphere in the family home, for reading of the Bible was part of the daily routine. Sister Bernadette McGoohan, who was one of the first Sisters to join Mother Francis when she began working in Blue Bell Hill, Nottingham, in 1887 often remarked, “She seemed to know the Bible by heart.”

Whatever her upbringing was, it certainly prepared Margaret Murphy for the long years of struggle and hardship that lay ahead of her when she left the shores of Ireland in 1870 at the age of twenty-seven to join the newly-founded Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God at Cavendish Square, London, England. How did that come about? Her entry into an English Congregation was evidently the consequence of a visit in 1870 by Mother Magdalene Taylor to the Adoration Convent in Wexford. From there Mother Magdalene travelled to Enniscorthy, and it was probably on that occasion that she met Margaret who decided to return with her to England and enter the Congregation of which Mother Magdalene Taylor was the Foundress.

The same month that Margaret Murphy came to Cavendish Square – November 1870 Cardinal Manning visited the newly acquired premises and gave the necessary permission for Mass to be celebrated in the Chapel once a week and for the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved. The House in Cavendish Square was the first recognised Convent of the Congregation. This was probably the first time that Margaret, still a postulant, met Cardinal Manning, the Prelate who was to be God’s instrument in bringing into being yet another new Congregation eighteen years later.

When Margaret received the habit, a black one with a blue scapular, from Father Clare S.J. (Jesuit) on 2nd February 1871 at Cavendish Square, she was also given the religious name Mary Francis of the Holy Souls. She was the ninth member of the Congregation.

Because Cardinal Manning gave his wholehearted support to this Congregation, sister Francis was associated with Manning from 1870 onwards. From the very beginning of their association Mother Magdalen Taylor saw that Margaret Murphy was born to govern others, as Father Etienne had said of her several years before. She placed great trust in Margaret (Sister Francis) recognising her as a prayerful and intelligent

person, and consequently she was put in charge of apostolates and new foundations very early in her religious life.

In July 1872 six Sisters, including Sister Francis, went to Beaumont College, the Jesuit School near Windsor, to supervise the laundry for the College, teach in an elementary school for the children of the workmen employees on the college premises and other Catholics in the neighbourhood. The Sisters also visited the poor and the sick. Sister Francis was put in charge of this venture. They travelled to Beaumont by train even in those days, so the journeys were not new experiences to the Sisters when they moved about in the Nottingham Diocese in the early 1900's, or from Melton Mowbray to Stratford in the East End of London in the 1920'

On 2nd February 1873, two years after receiving the habit, Sister Mary Francis pronounced her first vows, presumably at Beaumont as this was the House in which the young Sisters resided

On 20th April 1873, Mother Magdalen went to Beaumont for a two day visit and during that time it seems that she spoke about the idea of sisters going to America. Apparently it was quite a common thing for religious to travel the fifteen day journey by sea to America, despite the appalling travelling conditions, in order to collect funds to finance whatever work the particular Congregation was engaged in. From the record of subsequent events it is evident that Sister M. Francis was chosen as one of the Sisters to undertake that mission. If you read a description of such a voyage in the mid-nineteenth century, with all the dangers as well as the discomforts involved, you will realise the courage and determination that must have been required to set forth on such a perilous journey. Sister M Francis and Sister Pauline her companion must not only have been strong in mind and body, and possessed of great faith in the protection and providence of God, but the Congregation's confidence in their capabilities must have been very high.

The idea developed into reality when, on 3rd May 1873. Sister Francis and Sister Pauline returned to Cavendish Square from Beaumont. They went with Mother Magdalene to visit Cardinal Manning to obtain the necessary letters from him for their American Mission. He also gave them a letter of recommendation.

On 13th May 1873 the two Sisters travelled to Liverpool and sailed for New York in the ship "City of Limerick." They arrived there safely but met with many difficulties and had a hard struggle to survive for the one year that they stayed in America.

In June 1874 Sister M Francis returned to London bringing with her a postulant, but no mention is made of her companion Sister Pauline. She either died there during that year or decided to stay in America, but this tells much about the character of Sister Francis that, she not only carried on alone in her given mission, but was able to persuade another person to join her and travel back to England with her across those stormy seas.

During the journey to America and back, it must have been brought home to Sister Francis very forcibly, the plight of the Irish people trying to make a new beginning for themselves in an alien country.

On 4th August 1874, just two months after her return from America, Sister Francis was once more ready to venture across the sea, but this time to her native country of Ireland. She went with Mother Magdalen and stayed for a week in Enniscorthy and Wexford. They then visited Avoca on the way to Clongowes, County Kildare where they were to establish their first House in Ireland. Mother Magdalen had been to Clongowes earlier in the year to discover that five or six Sisters would be needed if the Apostolate there, which had been offered to them by the Jesuit Fathers, was to be accepted. It was Clongowes Wood College, and the work was similar to that at Beaumont. They did in fact accept it and remained in the College for six years during which time it became a source of many vocations from local girls. Sister Francis remained in the College for about a month and then went with Mother Magdalene and two other Sisters to Limerick where another new House had recently been opened. This proved to be a temporary foundation, being closed after eighteen months of struggle against opposition and difficulties which made it impossible for the Community to be self-supporting. This rule of being self-supporting was to be an important one in the Congregation founded by Sister Francis years later, and it was through the events she experienced in the 1870's that she learned the value, but also the disappointments, which adhering to this rule could mean. Sister Francis was a member of the Community in Limerick which reluctantly had to withdraw in 1876 and at Beaumont which also closed in the same year, so she was no stranger to everything connected with the opening and closing of Houses.

By 1875 the Congregation numbered fifty-two, including novices and postulants. Mother Magdalen wanted her Sisters to relieve in some way, the thousands of poor Irish Catholics who inhabited the City of London. Consequently the Convent of Our Lady of Pity, Prince's Row, Soho was opened. The Sisters visited in the area of Warwick Street, St Patrick's Soho, Seven Dials Maiden Lane and Lincoln's Inn Field. We know that Sister Francis lived in this Community for a while because some of our own Franciscan Sisters could remember her speaking about the good work that was accomplished in all these areas. Castle Street, which is the location of the first House that Sister Francis acquired when she started out on her own is in the Parish of Corpus Christi Maiden Lane so she would have known the vicinity well and possibly a number of individual families.

In 1879 the Poor Servants moved to yet another property in Green Court, Little Pultany Street (near Regent Street) because the premises where they were living was condemned by the Metropolitan Board of Works! This particular community was engaged in refuge (rescue) work for poor fallen women, an apostolate which has since become an important one for the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. If Sister Francis helped Mother Magdalen to search for and negotiate with property agents etc. in the procuring of this particular house, then the experience would have been most helpful to her when she was looking for a house to rent in the Covent Garden/Long Acre area in 1887. Castle Street and Little Pultany Street are not a great distance from each other.

We know that Sr Francis was a member of the Community in Green Court, Little Pultany Street because we have letters written by her to her Superiors in 1885. These letters were kindly passed on to us by the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

On September 15th 1884 Cardinal Manning gave the Address at the opening of a hospital at St Helen's Lancashire in which he referred to the work of the Congregation in London in these words, "They (the Sisters) have worked in two central spots, the most crowded, the poorest, the most depraved in every sense of the word. I mean the Seven Dials and Drury Lane areas that are only too well known. In both of these areas (Castle Street runs between the two) the good Sisters have been labouring with me for years and with the result, I know, to have been most advantageous to the poor, that is in visiting them in their own homes, instructing them in domestic life by teaching them a science. This is how homes should be managed but I am sorry to say this is now almost extinct in many parts of England."

As a Poor Servant of the Mother of God Sister Francis participated in all these good works, and it was these same works which she and her Sisters continued to perform when she formed her own Congregation very shortly after the Cardinal had spoken the above words in St Helen's

In 1886 Cardinal Manning, a man who, because of his deep concern for the poor had done much to encourage new Congregations of sisters to work among them, conceived yet another plan by which the plight of the poor in London might be relieved. He had been contemplating house-to-house visiting for some time, as many catholics were dying without the help of the Church. He approached one of the Congregations already carrying out his wishes, the Poor servants of the mother of God, at their Convent in Brentford. When the Cardinal made his request, the Foundress and Superior of the Poor Servants, Mother Magdalen Taylor, was perturbed. She had been advised that her Sisters had more than enough work to cope with, and yet her esteem for the Cardinal, and her gratitude to him for all that he had done for the Congregation would not allow her to refuse him. However, one of the Sisters in the Community volunteered to do this work which the Cardinal deemed necessary. Her name was Sr Mary Francis of the Holy Souls; her family name was Murphy and she came from Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford Ireland, where she had been born in 1843. So little is known about her Family, her childhood or her background. It can only be assumed that Sr Francis was a very humble person who did not speak about herself. We do know, however, from the valuable help given to us by the Poor Servants when searching for facts, that Sr Francis was always regarded as a prayerful, intelligent, trustworthy religious who was put in charge of different groups and apostolates, even as a newly professed Sister. She was evidently born to lead and govern others.

Consequently, the willingness of Sr Francis to attempt the task that the Cardinal had proposed made it easier for Mother Magdalen to suggest that this particular Sister be given the responsibility. As far as we know, that is what happened, the result being that Sr Francis began the new apostolate of house-to-house visiting.

Looking back on these events it is possible to say that by allowing Margaret Murphy to experience the hardships, trials, setbacks and difficulties, as well as the joys and achievements inherent in the early days of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God that God was, at long range as it were, preparing her for the time when, a decade later, she herself would be the Foundress of a new Congregation.

When the Congregation, which today has the title of Franciscan Sisters Minoresses first emerged from the desperate social conditions of London at the end of the nineteenth century, it had no title and very little structure because it was literally born of the social conditions, which at that time were chaotic! In 1888, the year which we recognise now as the one in which our Sisters began the specific work to which our Foundress was called, that of house to house visiting of the poor and needy, the city of London was a dreadful place. It was that about which Dickens wrote so graphically; it was the very time in which inhabitants of the city went about in fear of Jack the Ripper – and the story of Fanny by Gaslight sums up just one aspect of life in the city. Yet there were people who not only wanted to change the living conditions and moral standards of the thronging multitudes, but were willing to spend their lives doing so. Such a person was Cardinal Manning (1808-1892) a convert, Anglican clergyman who came from a rich, upper middle-class family, and was directly responsible for the emergence of the Religious Congregation about which these pages are written.

After his appointment as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, following the death of Cardinal Wiseman in 1865, he was generally known as “the People’s Cardinal”, and was greatly concerned about the poor of London, whatever their nationality. To quote from his sermon, given at the Jesuit church in Farm Street on 28 July 1888, when appealing for three new Homes that he wanted to establish for destitute women, he described London asa wilderness. It is like Rome of olda pool into which all the nations of the world streamed together and all the sins of all the nations were continually flowing. Such is London at this day, and in the midst of London there are, some tell us, forty thousand, some tell us eighty thousand, who like Mary Magdalene, like her in her fall, but not yet like her in her repentance. There is a heavy obligation upon us, I mean the faithful of London, to labour to multiply and extend this work of charity (i.e. of founding Homes and Refuges for destitute women) This extract from one of the Cardinals sermons on social evils highlights just one of the problems that he was trying to cope with, as head or leader of the Catholic Church in England in the 1880s

As a Poor Servant of the Mother of God, Sister Francis worked with these young women in the Homes that the Congregation had established in various parts of Central London.

The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church in England had only been restored in 1850 after many years of persecution. Nicholas Wiseman was the first Cardinal and he was given the task of restoring the Church to some kind of institutional order. In his determination to restore schools, homes, refuges, orphanages, seminaries, training establishments of every kind in which the spiritual as well as the material needs of the people, particularly the young, could be catered for, the Cardinal organised the help of Catholic women. At one stage he said that he would have to found at least nine Congregations of Religious to handle all the different problem areas of society. He died before he could achieve this, but he invited women to come to England from the continent, groups of women who were already professed Religious, with a rule of life and established ways of doing things. They had the knowledge and training to be able to run schools, orphanages etc, and they did just that. There were also many women among the Christian community in England who, as a result of the Oxford Movement, changed their Faith from that of the Anglican Church to the Catholic Church and under the influence and guidance of Cardinal Manning formed themselves into new congregations. Both Fanny Taylor, Foundress of The Poor Servants and Mother Francis, our Foundress, are examples of this.

As the numbers in the Congregations grew, so their Convents became larger. The particular need to which they were dedicated e.g. a boarding school, home for orphans, fallen women or whatever, the people being cared for came into the premises and the Sisters pursued their dedicated work within the confines of the Convent. The Sisters were not seen out among the poor as much as at the beginning. The social structure of the Religious Life was becoming less open and free. The Sisters were set aside apart from the people, isolated by rules and regulations. Thus, when the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God had been in existence for eighteen years and they had many established Convents, and the Sisters were engaged in almost every work of charity needed at the time, Sister Francis Murphy who had joined the Congregation in 1870, was ready to embark on a new venture. The following paragraph is pure conjecture, as we have no facts to prove it – only the memories of some of our very first Sisters, gathered by Friar Leonard Scuts OFM who produced a booklet printed by CTS Dublin in 1940 entitled "Blessed Are The Poor."

It is believed that Sister Francis regarded the specific work that Cardinal Manning was anxious to have started, i.e. house to house visiting of the Irish immigrants who had come to England as a result of the potato famine in their country, a means by which she could return to the initial charism of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God i.e. visiting the poor in their own homes and surroundings. Thus, when in approximately 1886, Cardinal Manning, who had done so much to help the Poor Servants, and consequently knew the organising qualities of Sister Francis, asked the Congregation to undertake work among the very poor Irish community living in desperate circumstances in the Long Acre and in the Covent Garden district of London. Sister Francis volunteered to do the work.

When Sister Francis first began this work in the Long Acre, Covent Garden area, she travelled back and forth from the Convent of the Poor Servants in Brentford, to Covent Garden every morning and evening. She gradually realised that the travelling was taking up a lot of time, energy and money, which would be better, spent looking after the families that she was visiting and caring for. She asked permission to look for a suitable place in the Covent Garden area, where she could live, instead of returning to the Convent in Brentford every evening. She was granted permission, and with other Sisters who seemed willing to help her, went "house hunting." They eventually found living quarters above a shop in Castle Street, Covent Garden which was re-named Shelton Street in 1928 and still bears that name. We think it was number 20 and is still inhabited

Having known Cardinal Manning for virtually the whole of her life as a Poor Servant of the Mother of God, his love of St Francis of Assisi must have influenced her in her choice of living the Rule of St Francis when she ceased to be a member of the Poor Servants.

It was Cardinal Manning who re-established the Poor Clares in England after the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850. He brought some Sisters from Bruges, Belgium, to found a Convent in Bayswater and they remained there until sometime in the

1970's He also re-established the Third Order of St Francis (Tertiaries) in this country. He built St Mary of the Angels Church in Bayswater (1857) naming it after the Portiuncula Chapel in Assisi. His Oblates of St Charles, who were all members of the Third Order of St Francis later built St Francis Church, Pottery Lane, Bayswater. Sister Francis must have often attended Mass at these churches both while she was a Poor Servant and when visiting Cardinal Manning, after she left that Congregation. Working among poor people from the time she first came to London in 1870, in a Congregation specifically dedicated to the poor, it is not surprising that she had a deep devotion to St Francis. Margaret Murphy had taken the religious name 'Francis' when she became a Poor Servant of the Mother of God and retained that name when she separated from them, living up to the ideals of St Francis for the rest of her life.

All the Franciscan Minoreesses who knew her (she died in 1927) were impressed by the way she could quote a text from Scripture to suit almost any situation. It was as if she knew the Gospels by heart and had pondered on them so often and to such depth that the appropriateness of a particular incident in the life of Our Lord, or something that He had said, would give courage to the Sisters when they needed it greatly – and that was very often in the early days of the new Congregation. This deep absorption with the gospels, and obvious understanding of their message, puts Mother Francis almost naturally in the circle of the followers of St Francis, for this is precisely what his Rule is, "To live the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

At the time that this venture of house-to-house visiting was begun Sister Francis was residing in the Convent at Brentford. She, therefore, started travelling daily from Brentford to Long Acre and Covent Garden to seek out and assist the poor. They were mostly destitute Irish immigrants, trying to survive in dreadful conditions. They had come to England because of the famine in their own country, seeking work and a place in which to live. As the ministry unfolded, Sister Francis saw the necessity of living in the area instead of travelling twice daily from Brentford to London and back. She was given permission to rent some property in the area and she eventually found a suitable premises in Castle Street – renamed Shelton Street in 1938. To date, there is only one indication of the Sisters' presence there, apart from oral accounts in Covent Garden, and that is the Post Office London Directory from 1891-1893 which lists the Corpus Christi Home for Girls at 2 Castle Street. There is no mention of the Home in the archives of the only existing Catholic Church in that area in 1887 – Corpus Christi Church, Maiden Lane.

Castle Street links Long Acre with the Strand. It was, and still is, a dark, narrow street lined with warehouses on one side and small shops with two or three floors of living quarters on the other. On either side of it are narrow alleyways leading to the back entries of theatres, hotels and restaurants. It was probably three floors of one of these buildings that Sister Francis rented as her first Convent. Only very poor people lived in these back streets, but it was in this locality that Sister Francis chose to live.

It is believed that one or two other Sisters from the Community of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God in Brentford asked, and were given permission to join Sister Francis in this new apostolate of house-to-house visiting and caring for the poor in their own accommodation, which had been requested by Cardinal Manning.

It took great faith in the Providence of Almighty God, and much physical strength, courage and love to undertake the work assigned to them by the Cardinal in these circumstances, but these Sisters who were still Poor Servants of the Mother of God, had the necessary qualities – and that has been repeated over and over again in the history of the Congregation which Sister Francis later founded – the Franciscan Sisters Minoress.

The accommodation which Sister Francis and her helpers rented in Castle street was in an ideal location for the work which they had undertaken. It was, and still is, very close to Maiden Lane, where the Catholic Church of Corpus Christi is situated. This church was built at the instigation of Cardinal Manning and opened in October 1874. Cardinal Manning preached the sermon in which he pointed out that this was the first Church to be dedicated to Corpus Christi for over 300 years, that is since before the reformation! It was initially built to serve the workers in the nearby market of Covent Garden.

The lane in which the Church stands is called Maiden Lane from medieval times when a statue of Our Lady stood in the lane. It is presumed that Sr Francis and her helpers attended this Church for daily Mass and other services. At one end of Castle/Shelton Street the famous fruit, flower and vegetable market of Covent garden has existed for at least 70 years.

It was the stall-holders and coster-mongers, or barrow boys, of this market who gradually got to know the Sisters well and the work they were doing for the poor and gave them left-over fruit and vegetables at the end of the day with which they could make meals and soup for the poor whom they visited – and for themselves!

Having found accommodation for themselves, the three or four Sisters formed the foundation of a new religious community, and as their work of visiting, comforting, feeding and caring for the people in their own dwelling places, more often than not, unfit to be called a home, progressed, their thoughts and prayers turned to the prospect of becoming an autonomous (self-governing) group, independent of the poor Servants of the Mother of God Congregation. It followed easily for that small group to look to the Life and Rule of St Francis of Assisi for guidance. Both Cardinal Manning and Sister Francis were influenced by the Poverello's special concern for the disadvantaged, the marginalised, the social misfits, the extremely poor and in need of help of every kind. These were the people that Sister Francis and her Companions were working with in the Castle Street and surrounding areas. The Sisters brought them food and clothes, showed them how to manage better on small amounts of money, comforted them in their sadness, despair and loneliness. They nursed the sick and provided them with whatever medicines they could procure.

;The life of these pioneer Sisters was indeed one of great hardship, sharing as they did the life of poverty of those among whom they lived and worked. In order to alleviate in some measure the misery caused by hunger, inadequate housing, unemployment and other sad and degrading circumstances, the Sisters did laundry work and all kinds of needlework. The money thus earned was used to pay the Sisters' rent, food bills and other necessities, and to buy food, medicines, clothes and bedding, among other things, for those whom the Sisters tried to help in every possible way. They soon came to appreciate the truth that it is the poor who help the poor, and monetary aid often came in unexpected ways.

An extract from "Blessed Are the Poor," a CTS pamphlet written by Friar Leonard Scuts about the history of our Congregation in 1940 illustrates this

"A huge sailor, with the bluster and tang of the sea all about him stepped into the Convent parlour one wintry morning He had probably just arrived back in London on one of the ships docked in the Thames, which in the nineteenth century was a thriving port for ships from all over the world. He must have learned that Sister Francis was in Castle Street five minutes walk from the Thames. He seemed very much out of place and awkward in that tiny cramped room, and experienced that shyness inherent in many seafaring folk, but, he must see Sister Francis! He owed her a debt he could never pay, for she had given him back confidence in himself and God when all seemed lost. Now he had made good and wanted to repay her.

On seeing her he thrust out his big hand, mumbled a few words and hurried away down the stairs and into the street again before Sister Francis realised that she held a crisp five-pound note in the palm of her hand. Tears filled her eyes. It was a gift from heaven. Maybe she had taken this man down to the docks herself when he was a young unemployed man

A young widow with her children had just been evicted from her room because she could not pay the rent. Her handful of belongings made a sorry sight as they lay on the pavement and she wondering where she could go. What could she do? The problem was solved when Sister Francis arrived, eyes beaming, and announced her good fortune. Concerned neighbours literally lifted furniture, mother and children back to the empty room again.

This small group of dedicated Sisters 'went about doing good.' The needy were clothed and fed, the ignorant were instructed, children were taken regularly to Holy Mass and few now died without the Rites of the Church.

THE DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM

I will begin the story of the Franciscan Minoreesses in the Diocese of Nottingham, which is one of the original twelve dioceses in England created at the time of the restoration of the Hierarchy by Pope Pius IX in 1850. I quote from the centenary brochure of the Parish of Our Lady and St. Edward, Blue Bell Hill, Nottingham. The event was celebrated in 1985, and the Friars Minor had then been in charge of the Parish since 1930.

“The Friars came to Nottingham over fifty years ago to share the harsh living conditions of the area at that time. Since then great progress has been made. Today the hardships are different but still severe.

“I pray that you may all continue to live the ideals of St. Francis for many years, happy to be poor, rejoicing in the pains of hardship, and living in service to all, so that the image of Christ may be seen in the faces of all his brothers and sisters.”

The letter is signed by Father Luke Faupel O.F.M. Provincial

Our Sisters, then known as the Franciscan Missionary Sisters had first arrived in the Parish of Our Lady and St. Edward in 1897 and resided there until 1900, when they moved to Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. During their time in Blue Bell Hill, they certainly lived the ideals of St. Francis mentioned in Father Luke's letter quoted above. How did they come to be in the Diocese of Nottingham after working in the Diocese of Westminster since 1888? It was through an invitation given to them by Bishop Edward Bagshawe, who had been appointed as Bishop of the Diocese of Nottingham, at the desire of Cardinal Manning, in 1874. Edward Bagshawe was born in London in 1829 and educated at Oscott. In 1849 he entered the Oratory at Brompton and was ordained three years later. It appears that he first came to the notice of the future Cardinal during the Crimean War 1854-1856. Manning was searching for chaplains; Father Bagshawe volunteered, and went. During his time in the Crimea, ministering to the sick and dying soldiers in the military hospitals in Scutari, he must have made the acquaintance of Fanny Taylor, a volunteer nurse who fourteen years later founded the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, the Congregation which Margaret Murphy (Sister Francis) entered in 1870, in Cavendish Square, London.

On his return to London, after the war, Father Bagshawe became an enthusiastic supporter of the new work among the poor which Manning was organising in the Westminster Diocese. He also became an Oblate of St. Charles, the body of secular priests dedicated to the work of building up the Diocese of Westminster which Cardinal Wiseman had commissioned Dr. (later Cardinal) Manning to form in 1857. All the Oblates of St Charles were members of the Third Order of St Francis. When Father Bagshawe was appointed Bishop of Nottingham in 1874, he went with the express purpose of carrying out the Cardinals policies, so it was not surprising that the invitation to work in Nottingham was given to Sister Francis Murphy. They had both received their inspiration from their mutual friend, Cardinal Manning. Sister Francis had probably met Father Bagshawe on several occasions when she was

a Poor Servant of the Mother of God, in connection with her work and at the London Brompton Oratory. The foundation stone of this beautiful church, situated as it is in the district that was so well known to the Sisters through their work with the poor, was laid by Bishop Bagshawe. He was delegated to perform this ceremony by the Cardinal who was then in Rome. He also performed the Consecration ceremony on 16th April 1884 and he said the first Mass. It was in the oratory that the funeral of Cardinal Manning took place on 21st January 1892, by which time Sister Francis had left the Poor Servant; She had left in 1888. It is possible that she and her sisters were present at the funeral, or were among the crowd of sorrowing people who filed through the chapel where the Cardinal lay in state the previous day. Men and women of every class and rank mourned the passing of this great friend of the poor, "the cardinal of the people, as he was affectionately called."

If Sister Francis was present at Cardinal Manning's lying in state and/or his funeral it may have been at this time that Bishop Bagshawe was able to speak with her and invite her to come and work for him in the Diocese of Nottingham. He knew that it was Sister Francis who had readily agreed with the Cardinal's proposal that religious sisters undertake the apostolate of house to house visitation of poor families in the Covent Garden area and had volunteered to do it. He also knew what high regard the Cardinal had held for Sister Francis, and how she and her few helpers must be devastated by his death. He must have been grateful to her when she agreed to take up his invitation. She was not, however, prepared to go to Nottingham immediately; she had plans to put into operation.

MISSING YEARS

In the C.T.S. Pamphlet entitled, "Blessed Are the Poor," written by Father Leonard Scutts OFM, giving a short account of the beginnings of the history of the Franciscan Minoresses, it states, "The death of His Eminence Cardinal Manning in 1892, four years after Sister Francis and her Companions made their break with the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, and still residing in Castle Street, Covent Garden, left the young Franciscan Community bereft of a friend and firm support. In conjunction with his spiritual, moral and practical inspiration, the Cardinal had guided the small Community through initial survival threats. When the Sisters grieved for children, vulnerable to the dangers of Long Acre streets, the Cardinal and his friends secured a larger home to accommodate an orphanage. The Sisters had already been accommodating three or four homeless children in Castle Street, as recorded in the Post Office Records as the Corpus Christi Home for Girls (Catholic), but 1893 is the last year for it to be mentioned in these records.

A person who had been a Poor Servant of the Mother of God with Sister Francis, but left before Sister Francis began her own Congregation, was running an orphanage in Holly Place, Hanwell, and I guess it was to this orphanage that Sister Francis and her Companions went, taking the children that they were already looking after in Castle Street with them.

The name of the person in charge of that orphanage who had been in the novitiate of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God with Sister Francis (1872 approximately) was Alice Stafford, whose religious name was Berchman. She had left the Congregation in 1886 in order to try her vocation as a Poor Clare. There was a Poor Clare Convent in Bayswater at that time. However, she evidently did not persevere as a Poor Clare because several years later (1901) her name appears in the records of the Littlehampton Franciscan Sisters in Holly Place, Hanwell, North London. She was using the religious name she had had as a Poor Servant of the Mother of God and was running a small orphanage in Lower Boston Road, Hanwell, single-handed! Significantly the orphanage bore the name Corpus Christi – the same as the title for the Home in Castle Street in the Post Office records from 1890-1893!

In the late 1880's the orphanage was again taken over, this time by the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace, whom we know as the Rearsby Sisters. Perhaps Sister Francis and Sister Berchman being free of the orphans and the orphanage went back to Wexford from whence they both came to recruit postulants for the work which Bishop Bagshaw had invited Sister Francis to undertake in his Diocese of Nottingham, but Sister Francis had asked for time to prepare! The reason for my thinking this is that in 1899, only two years after Sister Francis did arrive in Blue Bell Hill Nottingham, the names of seven novices are given for First Profession, six of them being from Ireland. I presume Sister Francis must have instructed them about Religious Life but whether in Ireland or England we do not know. We do know, however, that when they arrived in Nottingham, Sister Francis, and whoever came with her, were wearing Franciscan habits and calling themselves the "Sisterhood of St Francis." Were they already Franciscans?

Following up this "hunch" I wrote to the Friars in Wexford to ask if they could check some names in the secular Franciscan Registers which I presumed were in their

possession! I didn't realise that the Conventual Friars had taken over the Friary, which had once belonged to the Friars Minor in Wexford, but Father Aidan Walsh kindly forwarded my letter and consequently I got results!! I sent him the names of the seven women who made their Profession in Blue Bell Hill Nottingham and were therefore our first Sisters in Nottingham, plus the secular names of Sister Francis and Sister Berchman. Imagine my surprise and delight when I received a reply from Father Aidan Walsh, Conventual Friar, Wexford enclosing a letter from Mr Jim Summers who helps the Friars and in his search of Third Order Registers had found: -

Margaret Francis Murphy received the habit on 26th October 1891

Mary T Bourke received the habit on 17th December 1893.

I was surprised to see the secular name of Sister Rose, because I had hoped that it would be the name Alice Stafford, but I am grateful that these two names were found. Could they be Mother Francis and Sister Rose (Mary T Bourke) If so, it tells us that they both became Franciscans in Wexford not long before they came to Nottingham in 1897.

Mother Francis and, I presume, Mary Bourke arrived in Nottingham in 1897 in full Franciscan habits – could they have been habits received at their inauguration as Third Order members in Wexford in 1891 and 1893?

If these two names are those of Mother Francis and Mother Rose, did they spend the time up until 1897 in Ireland recruiting other young women to join them for the work, which Bishop Bagshawe had invited Mother Francis to undertake in the Diocese of Nottingham?

I may be wrong in my thinking, but I always thought that when a person received the habit as a member of the Third Order of St Francis (Tertiaries) they had the privilege of being buried in that habit if they so wished. I do not know if that still applies because people who become members of the Third Order, now called the Secular Franciscan Order, are not given a habit when they are professed. At the time, however, when Margaret Francis Murphy in 1891 and Mary Teresa Bourke in 1893 received the habit, they may have got permission to wear it with a cord and a veil as a religious habit – otherwise, where did they get their habits, which they were wearing when they arrived in Nottingham in 1897? And where did the habits come from in which the six novices were clothed when they were Professed in Blue Bell Hill, Nottingham in 1899?

Bishop Bagshawe was already a member of the Third Order of St Francis and the priest in charge of the Parish of St Edward and Our Lady, Blue Bell Hill, to which Mother Francis came, was also a member of the Third Order!!

NOTTINGHAM 1897-1900

When Mother Francis and her Sisters stepped from the train at Nottingham Station in 1897, they did so confidently, in the knowledge of Bishop Bagshawe's leadership. Unknown to them at the time, a new dimension of their Franciscan ministry was opening before them.

The Sisters took residence in what they named St. Clare's Convent, a cramped little house at 9 Matthias Road. They entered immediately into their ministry, being known as the Sisterhood of St. Francis. The Parish of St. Edward and Our Lady was situated in a very poor section of the very old city of Nottingham.

In 1899, the Franciscan way of life lived by the Sisters attracted membership, so they sought larger premises. It so happened that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, a Congregation founded in Nottingham by Bishop Bagshawe, had only recently vacated their convent called Beacon House on Blue Bell Hill, so it was acquired by our Sisters who at that time were known as Franciscan Missionary Sisters. This house became their Mother House and Noviciate for the years that we remained in Nottingham.

The names of some of the Sisters who were professed in Blue Bell Hill:

1898 Sr. Ignatius McAuley, 1899 Sr. Rose Bourke, Sr. Edith Howlett, Sr. Angela Shryne, Sr. Colette McGuinness, Sr. Isidore Lennon, Sr. Mildred Brooksbank, Sr. Clare McCormac, and in 1900 Sr. Genevieve Power.

When in 1899, the number of children attending the Parish school of St. Edward's increased so rapidly that two extra teachers were needed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace who staffed the school, the Franciscan Sisters were asked if they would help. It was an entirely new sphere of activity for them but they bravely tackled it, and school reports bear ample witness to their success and influence. The two pioneers in this particular apostolate of teaching were Sisters Joseph Howlett and Mildred Brooksbank. They were followed by other members of the community and a very high standard of efficiency was attained in spite of numerous obstacles. Thus began the Franciscan Sisters' commitment to education, a service to the Church and the people of God that has been fulfilled with diligence down to the present day.

Besides teaching in the normal day programme they were involved in other parish activities. It is recorded in the Parish archives that the Sisters ran a special night class during the winter months for the young people of the Parish.

Extract from the archives kept by the Friars, Gordon Road, Nottingham.

1897 during the winter months. ...Night Classes for men and women run by the Franciscan Sisters Father Ignatius Beale TOSF (Third order of St Francis) was the priest in the parish when the Franciscan sisters came from Hanwell, where they were just beginning... (i.e. to be a Congregation) They lived in St Clare's Convent 9 Matthias Road until the Sisters of Peace left Beacon House for Hollygirt on December 24th 1898. the Franciscan Sisters then moved to Beacon House at the beginning of 1899. This became their Mother House. They taught very successfully in the school and left for Melton Mowbray Leicestershire in 1900

Bishop Bagshawe, Bishop of Nottingham Diocese since 1874 retired in 1901. He was succeeded by Bishop Robert Brindle until 1916, and then Bishop Robert Dunn until 1931

OAKHAM RUTLANDSHIRE 1898 – 1903

In 1898, whilst Mother Francis was working in St Edwards Parish, Blue Bell Hill, Nottingham, with Sisters Rose Bourke, Edith Howlett, Angela Shryne, Colette McGuinness, Isidore Lennon, and Clare Mc Cormac, and they had only been in Blue Bell Hill for one year, a convent was opened by the Sisters in the small county town of Oakham, in Rutlandshire. The convent was named St. Anthony's, and was situated in Mill Street, adjoining the Catholic Church. There had been no Catholic Church in Oakham until eighteen years before the Sisters went there.

In 1868, when the Earl of Gainsborough became a convert Catholic, he built a beautiful chapel at his country seat at Exton, a few miles from Oakham, and he maintained a private chaplain. This chaplain opened a Mass centre in Oakham in 1879 and later, in 1875 a church was built. It was dedicated to St Joseph. When the Sisters arrived in 1898, there were approximately twenty Catholic families in the area. Ministry to this small number of Catholics, scattered throughout the countryside, was essentially supportive; home-visiting, religious instruction to lapsed and uninformed Catholics and catechism classes on a Sunday afternoon for the children. Bear in mind the information given earlier in this book about how the Faith and the teaching and practice of it had not been allowed for so many years i.e. from the sixteenth century. So it was not surprising that most of these people were in need of being instructed about the truths and practices of the Catholic Faith.

As in Nottingham, here too there was hostility born of ignorance of the Faith which had been denied to the people by the leaders of the country since the Reformation. This made it difficult for a group of Catholic religious Sisters to be accepted by the people of Oakham. The Sisters were often verbally abused as they went about their ministry. But they bore it all with great courage and gentleness knowing that they were witnessing to the goodness of the Lord and relying on His strength to persevere

It must have been very tiring, physically, to visit people, living in houses and farms around the town, journeying of foot because there would not have been any public transport in those days.

The following account written by a priest who ministered as Parish Priest in this same area almost fifty years after our Sisters left Oakham gives some idea just how difficult it must have been in 1898.

“St Joseph's was a parish with two small towns of Oakham and Uppingham and eighty-one villages. There used to be two priests in that Parish, but now there was only one. It was the size of a small mission territory. It took me a long time to visit around Rutland and some villages in Leicestershire which were part of the parish, but I found and visited Catholic homes in seventy-two of the villages in the area. They would thereafter receive a call from me about every two years. As in all the parishes I have served in, I found good people in St Joseph's who were involved and committed to serving the Church in any way they could.”

If a priest, with a car, found it very difficult to visit all his parishioners regularly what must it have been like for the Sisters on foot?

A further hardship for the Sisters was the fact that because they had no income from the work they were doing, they were often very hungry. Since the principle of self-support was faithfully observed (that is the Community engaging in some employment so as not to be a burden on the people among they lived.), the Sisters began doing laundry work for the gentry who came to Oakham and the surrounding areas every year for the fox-hunting season..

The techniques of laundering had been acquired by Mother Francis from her early and thorough training with the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. From early morning until often late at night, the Sisters spent their time, except for their spiritual exercises, doing laundry work in order to earn enough money to keep soul and body together. This activity is borne out by the 1901 census for St Anthony's Convent, Mill Street Oakham on which ten of the sisters in the Community at that time are listed as "Laundry Maids." Humanly speaking, spending so much time over steaming tubs and using hot flat irons they could not so that gruelling work and fulfil the demands of their apostolic ministry of visiting families and teaching the Faith. They were indeed hard days and humble tasks, but in spite of all, probably because of it all there was steady flow of vocations.

A story handed down and recorded in the CTS pamphlet "Blessed Are the Poor," by Fr Leonard Scutts OFM shows the calibre of those Sisters who lived in Oakham. Evidently there were two very good cooks in the Community, Sister Edith Howlett and Sister Baptista Hannigan – the latter was reputed to have been a cook on board big ships before she entered the Congregation. The story goes that as a special treat a cake that was normally baked with flour and dripping should be baked with flour and lard for an approaching feast day. A few old jam jars were collected and sold, the necessary ingredients bought, and the cake made. According to the old Sister who told the story, "She had never tasted a more lovely cake in all her life.!" They were hard but happy days because the Sisters were so united in the spirit of St Francis. Like St Francis they understood well that their mission was to the world. Like Francis, they experienced in Nottingham and in Oakham, as they would experience many times, wherever they were, the daily dying and rising to the new life of the redeemed. In unexpected yet providential ways, the sisters were growing in the Paschal Mystery.

An interesting picture of the Sisters ministry in Oakham lived on in the memory of Sister Rose Bourke, she enjoyed relating it to her novices. Every Sunday the Parish Priest would arrive from a neighbouring village in his pony and trap for the weekly Mass, accompanied by his fussy little terrier dog. Sometimes this good priest lost his voice. Nothing daunted either the priest or Sister Rose, She would go inside the altar rails (where women were not usually allowed except to clean the sanctuary) and she would read aloud the priest's sermon to the Congregation. In a quaint sense, both Priest and Sister accepted the reality of ministry long before Vatican 11. Sister Rose taught the catholic children on Sunday afternoons as there was no catholic day school in Oakham until 1976.

In October 1903, the Sisters from Nottingham and Oakham were called to the new Mother House and Noviciate which had been established at Melton Mowbray in 1900. The seeds of faith sown during those hard days did not fall on barren ground. A Catholic Church and Catholic school now testify to the Faith in the busy town of Oakham in Rutlandshire.

Short though their stay in Oakham had been the people with whom the Sisters came in to contact, remembered them for their Christlike qualities long after they had left. To quote from a letter received by the Sisters in 1925 from a Father Gilbert Higgins TOSF (Third Order of St Francis)

“In the 1924 Catholic Directory I have just come across “Franciscans, Sisters from Melton Mowbray” and I am wondering whether you belong to the Community I once gave a retreat to in Oakham. It is long ago but I remember well the great kindness I met with in that Convent. Should you be the same I beg your prayers for myself and my many pressing intentions.”

MELTON MOWBRAY

In 1900 the Sisters were prepared to tackle yet another outpost of the Diocese and on a cold December morning they travelled by train to the hunting town of Melton Mowbray Leicestershire. The town had a history of bigotry towards Catholics, the first attempt at building a Catholic Church in 1837 having been abandoned because of it. But with the resolute efforts of the Parish Priest of Grantham, fifteen miles away, and a notable Catholic family from Eastwell who had kept the Faith during penal times, a Pugin church was built and opened in 1842. It was dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The feelings then with which the Sisters were received by the inhabitants of the town were not cordial. They were looked upon as unwelcome intruders and were openly derided, being ridiculed by the young and scorned by the old. The brown religious habit worn by the Sisters with the words "Deus Solus" embroidered on the front of the scapular, was unfamiliar to them, and ignorance breeds unnecessary fear! As they walked through the streets they were insulted, but nothing daunted, the Sisters took up residence in a small house in Sherrard Street near St. John the Baptist Church, and remained there for several months. Their courtesy, kindness, and obvious goodness soon won the hearts of the people. It was sheer ignorance that had influenced the people to treat them with contempt on their arrival and, as has been proven many times since, when the Sisters have made new foundations in different areas, how easily this prejudice can be broken by turning the other cheek and practising Christ-like tolerance and charity. The Catholic population, very small in number and scattered over the countryside had little knowledge of their Catholic Faith. For several years they had been without a resident priest and this had not improved the situation. The Sisters therefore began a regular house to house visitation, just as they had done in London, and a small school with four Catholic pupils was started in the house to which they had now moved, 9 Thorpe End. The parish hall attached to St. John's was used for Sunday school and Children of Mary meetings with a Sister in charge. In a short space of time the number of pupils increased, both Catholics and non-Catholics, many of the latter becoming Catholics as a result of their contact with the Sisters. With the continual increase of children to accommodate, larger premises had to be sought and the Sisters moved once again, to the Manor House opposite the beautiful pre-Reformation church of St. Mary in Burton Street. Within a short time of the Sisters presence in the town, Bishop Bagshawe appointed a permanent priest to the Parish. His name was Father Hendricks and his testimony speaks for itself as regards the missionary work of the Sisters:

"I gladly testify that the community life and labours of these hard working Sisters, in the spirit of St. Francis, has exercised a beneficial influence both spiritual and temporal on the people of the town. They have proved themselves missionaries in bringing back to the Church lapsed and lost Catholics, instructing the ignorant and leading converts to the Faith. Their good influence has broken down barriers of prejudice and bigotry which so often in small towns alienate many from the Church."

At this time the Sisters were known as Missionary Sisters of St. Francis. In 1901, one year after the Sisters opened their first house in Melton Mowbray, their good friend Bishop Bagshawe resigned as Bishop of Nottingham, due to bad health. He returned to London, where he died in 1914 and was buried in Isleworth. In 1922 however, his mortal remains were brought back to Nottingham and placed in the crypt of the Cathedral. He was a saintly and well-loved prelate. He was succeeded by Bishop Brindle who earnestly desired that the Sisters should continue their good work. When

all the necessary material had been gathered and formulated, it was Bishop Brindle who gave approbation to the Constitutions.

In 1903 Tower House on Dalby Road, a spacious house compared with the other three houses which the Sisters had resided in since coming to Melton, was purchased. With the house, four acres of pastureland were also acquired, for which rent had to be paid to begin with. When this land was finally bought it was to prove an asset in countless ways. Melton Mowbray is a market- gardening town in the heart of farming country and the cattle market is held there every week. Many Sisters in the community came from families whose livelihood depended on farming and they knew the value of cows. The families of several Sisters sent them the price of a cow and thus the community was able to purchase a few animals to graze on the pastureland. Very soon and efficient farm was being managed to provide the necessary income to feed the expanding community. The large garden and orchard tended by the community provided fruit and vegetables, and the livestock supplied milk and butter which was home churned. The community also kept hens which provided eggs. More often than not, the eggs were sold to obtain a little money to pay other bills. It was a real treat if the Sisters had an egg for part of a meal.

The small all-age school which had begun so successfully in the town was now transferred to the premises on Dalby Road and quite a number of pupils stayed in the convent as boarders. Sister Rose Bourke was in charge of the school besides teaching elementary subjects she was also an efficient teacher of music, art and French. It is to her energy and ability that the quality of the school owes its debt. Also teaching in the school was Sisters' Mildred Brooksbank and Angela Shryne, both of whom had begun their teaching careers in St. Edward's school Blue Bell Hill Nottingham. Tower House became the property of the Missionary Sisters of St. Francis on 2nd December 1903. It is recorded in the logbook of St. Edward's School Blue Bell Hill Nottingham, that Sisters Ignatius McAuley, Joseph Howlett and Genevieve Power taught in that school until 1903, so presumably they still lived in St. Clare's convent, formally Beacon House. One Sister remembers older Sister, now gone to their reward, telling stories about Mother Francis and Mother Rose taking groups of boarders from Melton Mowbray to St. Clare's Blue Bell Hill for Sunday outings. The Sisters were extremely poor and did not have much to offer their visitors as a Sunday tea. By October 1903 all the Sisters who had been teaching in St. Edwards had resigned their posts as members of staff. Their services were needed in our own school in Melton Mowbray and consequently the convent in Blue Bell Hill had to be closed.

In order to provide for the boarders the Sisters often went short themselves. Partly due to this and partly as a result of the poverty and physical hardships which many of the community had now suffered for a number of years the health of several Sisters deteriorated and seven died within the space of eight years: Sister Clare Lennon 1902, Sister Angela Shryne 1905, Sister Collette McGuinness 1906, Sister Winniefrid O' Brien 1907, Sister Joseph Howlett 1908, Sister Ignatius McAuley 1909 and Sister Veronica Curran 1910. They are all buried beside the Church of St. John the Baptist, in the parish where they literally spent themselves in the service of God's people.

MELTON MOWBRAY 1903

Sisters Clare, Angela, Joseph and Ignatius had been teachers in St Edward's School in Blue Bell Hill Nottingham.

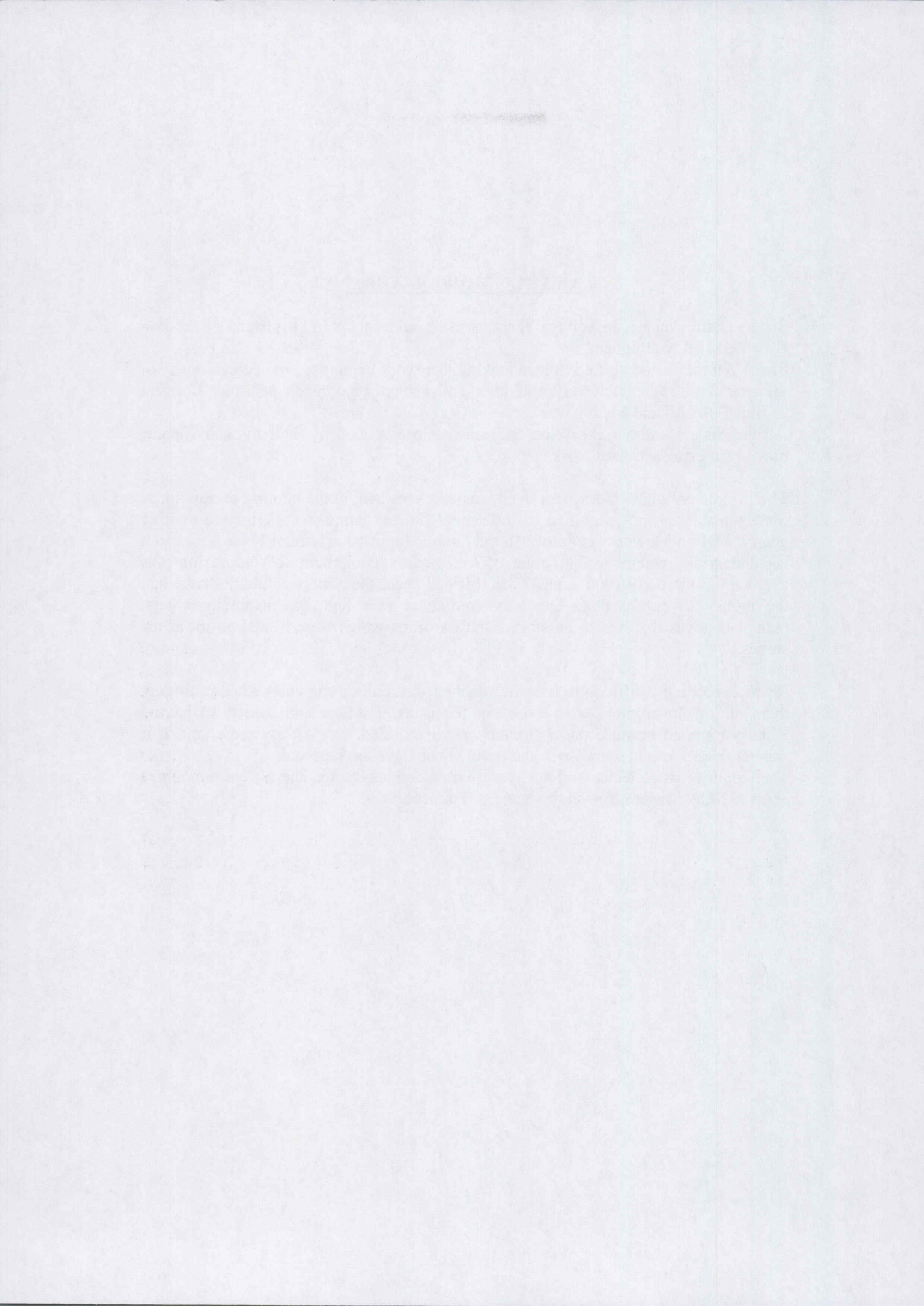
Sister Winniefrid was gifted in lace making, her work being used to decorate many of the altar cloths, tabernacle veils and other cloths beautifying the chapel in the Convent in Blue Bell Hill and Melton Mowbray.

All the Sisters without exception had drawn close to God by their lives of silence, prayer, suffering and hard work.

The income on which the Sisters lived was very small so, in the hunting season, those Sisters who were not occupied in the school did the laundry work for the hunting gentry. Melton Mowbray is a town in the famous foxhunting area of Leicestershire. It is salutary to remember that none of the modern equipment for laundering was available in the early 1900's, and even if it had been, the Sisters would not have had the money to purchase it. The only equipment they had was steaming boilers, mangles, stoves that had to be stoked and flat irons which were heated on the black stoves.

It was exceedingly difficult to iron the starched shirt collars and cuffs without dirtying them during the ironing, with those hot flat irons. The fear and anxiety of having laundry returned because the customer was dissatisfied, was always there, and if it was returned it meant extra work and probably no payment received.

The laundry was collected and delivered with a pony and trap. The Sisters sometimes enjoyed little pleasure trips in this means of transport.

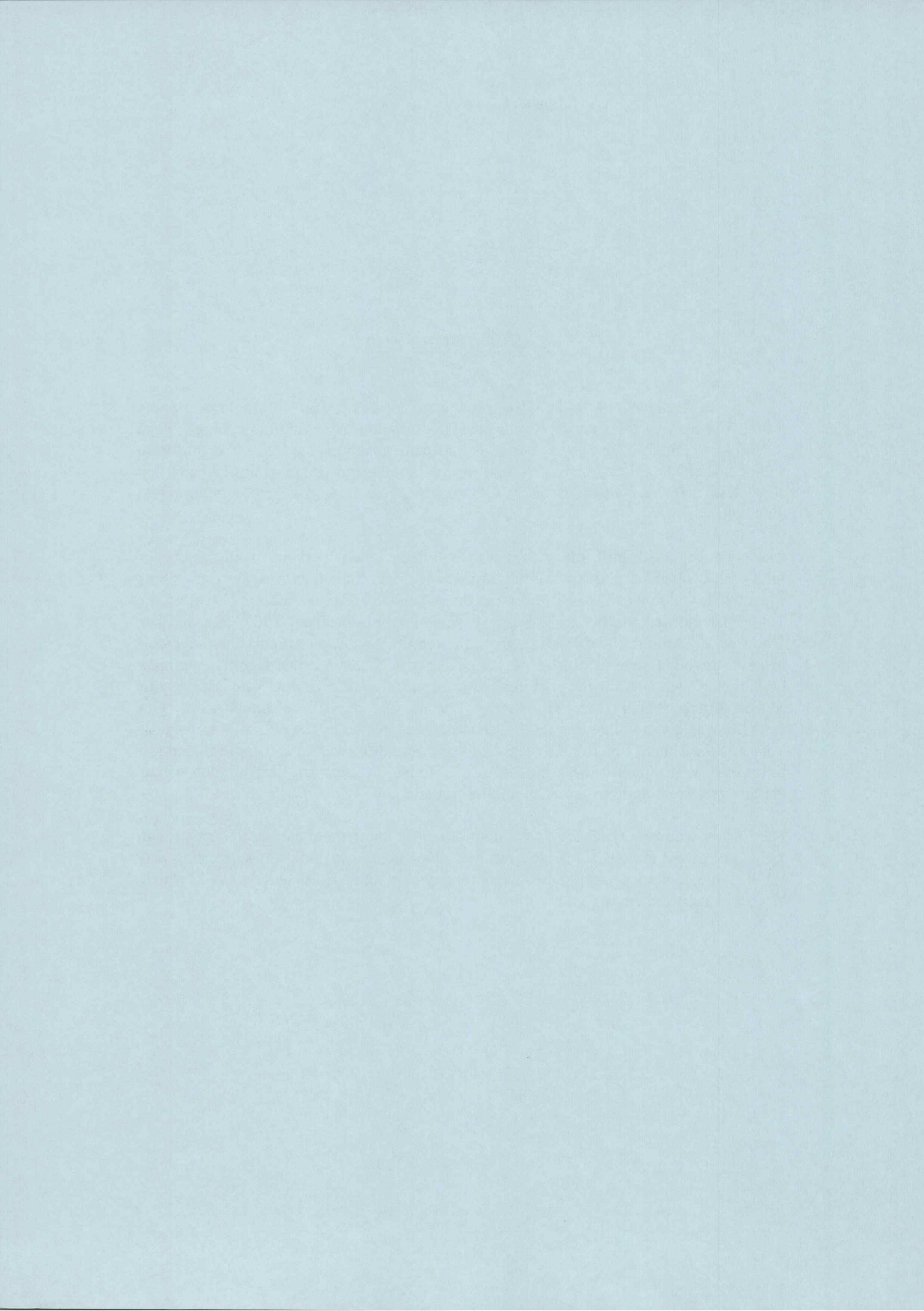


CARLINGFORD 1910

At the beginning of 1910 the Sisters were given a house in Carlingford, County Louth, Ireland, and an attempt was made to establish a Community there, which would do Parish work and hopefully attract vocations to the Congregation. Unfortunately the situation was almost a repetition of the situation in Oakham, and after less than two years of constant struggle to survive, the Sisters returned to England.

Sister Concepta Stafford, the person who had been a Poor Servant of the Mother of God with Mother Francis, had run an orphanage under the name of Sister Berchmans in Hanwell, which was listed as a Franciscan Convent in the Catholic Directory for 1900 and rejoined Mother Francis in Melton Mowbray in about 1907, renewed her Vows on 2nd August 1909 and was given the religious name Concepta. She is reputed to have travelled several times to Carlingford with Sister Monica Conneff, perhaps making arrangements for the packing and transportation of furniture. The last entry in Mother Francis' Diary for 1911 states, "On this 31st day of December 1911, Mrs Jordison was given notice that her house would be vacated by the end of March 1912. This was the House which the Sisters had used as the Convent in Carlingford, and the furniture was destined to be removed to the House in Stratford, East London where the Sisters were hoping to establish another foundation.

The Sisters who bravely faced such situations truly knew the meaning of that special regulation of the Franciscan Minoresses that they must always be self-supporting and not become a burden on the people among whom they lived and worked, which Mother Francis adhered to all her life

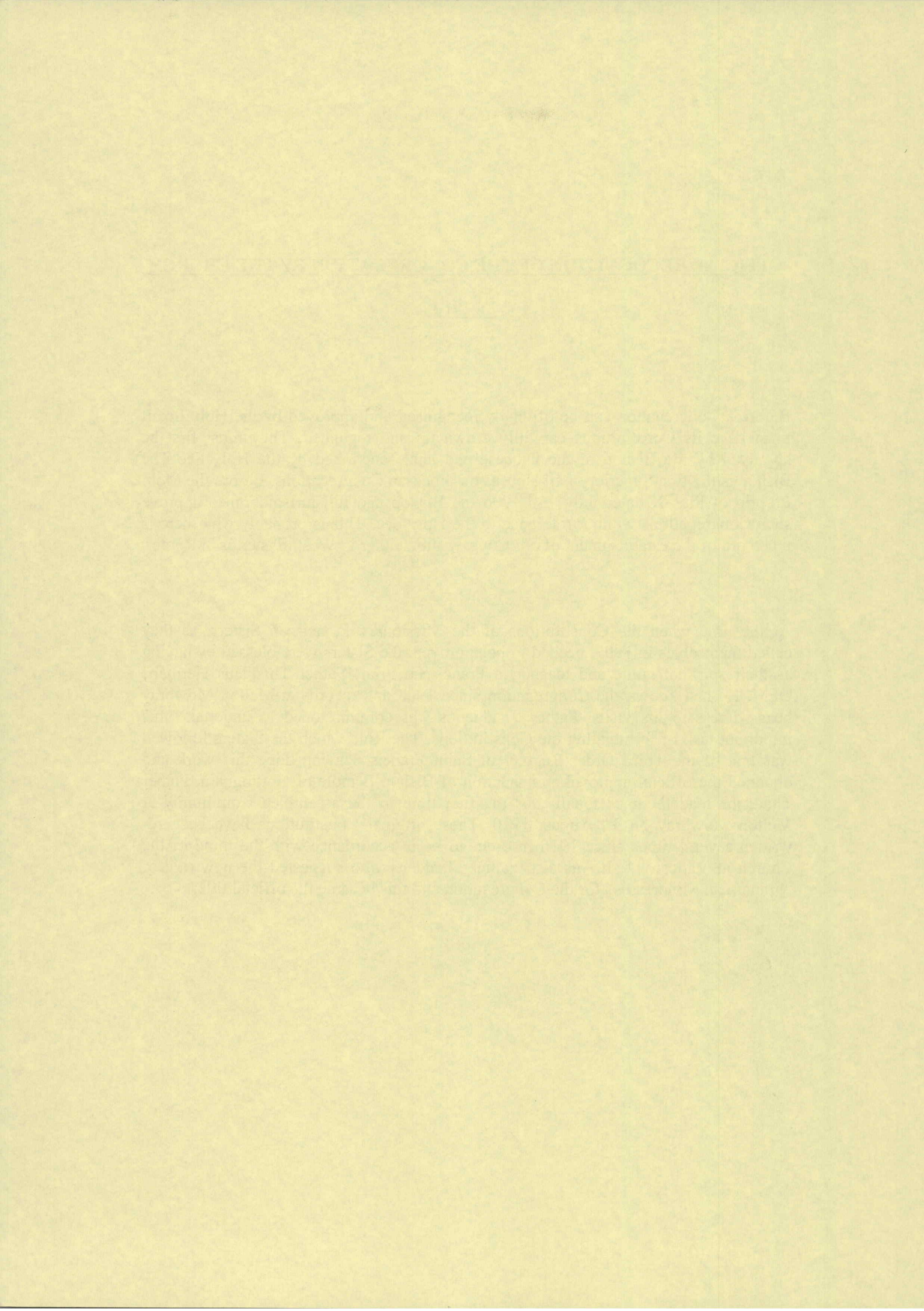


OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF THE CONGREGATION BY THE CHURCH

IN 1910

Before a Congregation can be officially recognised and approved by the Holy See it must have its Constitutions carefully drawn up and regulated. They must first be approved by the Bishop of the Diocese and later sanctioned by the Holy See. The Bishop is the first Superior of all Houses of Diocesan Congregations. Before the Motu Proprio of Pius X dated July 16th 1906 the Bishop had full jurisdiction to approve such Congregations without reference to the Holy See. This is probably why there is no record of the establishment of our Congregation either in Westminster or in Rome.

At the time when the Constitutions of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters, as they called themselves in 1907, needed to be approved, the Sisters were blessed by having as their spiritual guide and teacher, a Franciscan Friar, Father Thaddeus Hermans OFM. He had known the Congregation since 1903 and records at Melton Mowbray bear witness to his visits. Father Thaddeus was commissioned to undertake this important task of formulating the Constitutions. The Rule which the Sisters followed was that of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis. Having done this work and obtained the official approval and sanction of Bishop Brindle of Nottingham, Father Thaddeus read them personally for the first time to the assembled Community at Melton Mowbray on 3rd August 1910. These original Constitutions have been rewritten several times since 1910 in order to be in accordance with the mind of the Church at Vatican 11. It was also Father Thaddeus who suggested the new title of "Franciscan Minoresses" for the Congregation and this became the official title.



LETT ROAD, STRATFORD EAST LONDON

In 1912, from 18th-26th February, Father Herbert OFM came from London to conduct the annual retreat for the Community at Melton Mowbray. During that time I guess that discussions were held concerning a House in Stratford, London, because three days after Father Herbert's return to the Friary in Stratford, the following entry was made in Mother Francis' Diary:-

"On this first day in March 1912 it was decided to open a House in London in this month of March."

On 9th March, Mother Francis and a Sister went to London and rented the House there, returning on 11th March. The House was 61 Lett Road, Stratford, London E15, just to the right of the High Street going towards the City and nearly opposite Stratford vegetable market. Probably Father Thaddeus OFM or a parishioner in his confidence, had made all the preliminary negotiations for the renting of this property.

On 14th March, two Sisters from Melton Mowbray went to Ireland (Carlingford) to arrange for the furniture from the House to be transported to Lett Road, Stratford.

They returned to Melton on 16th March. It was on March 19th 1912 that Mother Francis went to London by train with Sister Antonia Malloy, Sister Concepta Stafford, Sister Michalina and Sister Monica Conneff to open a small rented house at 61 Lett Road, Stratford, London E15. They were met at St Pancras Station London by the Reverend Father Thaddeus OFM who accompanied them to Lett Road. Miss Kate Connolly a parishioner of St Francis Parish had prepared the house for their arrival and had a fire burning in the hearth. Sparsely furnished to begin with, more furniture was made available when the House in Carlingford was closed.

Although the Sisters took up residence on the Feast of St Joseph for the four years during which they lived there (1912-1916) the House was named St Patrick's Convent.

Sister Concepta Stafford, mentioned as one of the Sisters who went with Mother Francis to open this new Convent, was the sister who had run the orphanage in Hanwell under the name Sr Berchman, but had rejoined Mother Francis in Melton Mowbray making her First Vows in our Congregation in 1909. At that time she received the new Religious name of Concepta and was known by this name until her death in 1933. Sister Edith Howlett who had made her First Vows in Blue Bell Hill, Nottingham, in 1899 later became the fourth member of the Stratford Community.

The sisters went to Stratford at the request of Cardinal Vaughan who had succeeded Cardinal Manning as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster in 1892.

Like his predecessor, Cardinal Vaughan was extremely anxious about the plight of the poor and had great confidence in the way that religious Communities could win their trust and bring them back to the practice of their faith. In his own family, ten of his eleven brothers and sisters were in God's service.

The return of the Sisters to London, and the type of work that they did there-visiting, home-nursing, instructing children and adults, was much the same as had been accomplished by Mother Francis and her companions in her first foundation in Castle Street, Covent Garden. They set about their task immediately and only in heaven and in the hearts of the poor are the records of their charity fully known and remembered.

Mother Francis in later years occasionally spoke to the Sisters about her work among the poor Irish families in various parts of London, particularly Soho, Stratford and the Woolwich Docklands near Poplar. This visiting was mostly carried out on Saturdays and Sundays when the Sisters were successively in Lett Road, Carnarvon Road and Clova Road. For many years it was Sisters Paula, Rita, Antonia and Bernadette who did this, whilst Sister Seraphina, Isabella and Imelda taught Sunday School. On one day during the week Sister Rita and Sister Imelda would travel by 'bus to Custom House, another dock area, to visit and help the poor families there. The teaching sisters also took turns to visit these families and give them catechism instruction under the direction of Father Carless, a German priest. Sister Rita (McLoughlin) continued this work until her health deteriorated and she returned to the Mother House in Melton Mowbray where she died in May 1944. She was laid to rest at Eastwell, Leicestershire, beside Mother Clare McGoohan who had died in 1935

In response to an article which was printed in the local paper, the Stratford Express, when information was being gathered for this present history, one of the many replies received was particularly interesting:-

"Soon after the nuns arrived (in Lett Road) they invited the senior girls of the Parish to attend lace-making classes where we were taught the art of making Irish lace by Sister Edith on two evenings a week.

The school was about two hundred yards from the Sisters' House. This class continued until all the girls except myself stopped attending for various reasons. Some of the girls moved from the district and others reached school leaving age (fourteen) and therefore went to work. As I was still interested in the class the Sisters allowed me to go to their House where I sat in their little parlour, crocheting.

After the lace-making I learned how to make babies woollen garments and spent many peaceful hours during the holidays in their temporary Convent.

The writer of this letter is now a member of another Congregation and in the opening paragraph of her recollections she wrote, "A memorable time for me ! Who knows? It might have been the budding time of my vocation nurtured by your Sisters."

STRATFORD, EAST LONDON IN WARTIME

Twice our Sisters were residing in Convents in East London during the time of war, but they remained in their Convents to share the dangers, sorrows difficulties and anxieties of the people of that part of London among whom they lived, worked and ministered.

At the beginning of the 1914-18 First World War, four Sisters were living in Lett Road, Stratford and remained there until the end of the war in 1918, but the war was never mentioned in the Diaries (archives) of those years. It can be surmised, however, what the Sisters did for the families in Stratford during the war years.

Before the war began the post-boxes and hoardings along the streets had posters stuck on them inviting men to enlist for the armed forces. Queues were a familiar sight around Town Halls, hundreds of men waiting to 'sign up' at these impromptu recruiting offices. The posters showed the initials G.R. on either side of the King's coat of arms, above the large, black lettering, "Your king and Country need You." 100,000 men were needed in the grave emergency. The message underneath read "Lord Kitchener is confident that this appeal will be at once responded to by all those who have the safety of our Empire at heart." They wanted only men who were five foot three inches tall, with a chest measurement of at least thirty-four inches, and the minimum age was nineteen years! Desperate to get the numbers, many young men were accepted and assigned to regiments when they were only seventeen years of age many who volunteered in their droves had never been out of their home village, let alone on a boat crossing the English Channel to France. As there was no conscription, that is compulsory enlistment for military service, at the beginning of the war, apart from men who had chosen the armed forces as their career, the military commanders relied on volunteers to swell the ranks. Very many were eager to volunteer, were actually pleased to join up to get away from the hard work, the drudgery, the lack of a good, or any, future in the jobs they were doing. They looked upon this as a chance to avoid having to work in a cotton mill or down the pit. But they didn't know what was awaiting them – nobody did – and millions of them never returned.

The atrocities of the German soldiers were hyped in the English newspapers to encourage English boys to volunteer for the army and fight the Germans. Once the war started, a continuous supply of volunteer soldiers was needed to fight in the trenches in Belgium and France. August and September of 1914 were particularly wet months, that is why much of the trenches dug by the soldiers were inches deep in rain water and standing in the water for long periods affected the men's feet and legs. The soldiers were issued with lengths of khaki coloured material which they wound round their legs to keep the water out. They were called "putties."

From the time the fighting began in the trenches of Belgium and France, especially after conflicts like the Battle of the Somme, there was a constant stream of wounded soldiers being brought back to England for medical attention. Many were brought to the local hospitals to cope with the number of men who had sustained dreadful injuries. Many had lost limbs or needed shattered limbs to be amputated; many suffered damage to their lungs because they had inhaled poisoned gas; a huge number were suffering from shell shock which affected them in many different ways e.g. being terrified by noise or the sight and sound of water, all of which made them afraid of going out of the house. Families whose husbands, dads, older sons and brothers

came home with shell shock found it very difficult to cope with their menfolk who suffered in this way. There was very little, if any, help offered by the authorities because it was something which few people in the medical profession understood; it was a new phenomenon. Wives and mothers, indeed whole families had to cope as best they could.

One of the 'works of mercy' which the Community in Stratford was engaged in, both during and after the 1914-1918 war, was visiting these men in the local hospitals. There was a large hospital in Stratford and the London Hospital was only a short 'bus ride away in Mile End.

The Sisters also visited the wives and mothers of these men in their homes. Many were now bereaved widows or mothers, finding it difficult to explain to their children what had happened to Daddy. Many were trying to cope with husbands or sons who, were still alive but needing much care for their physical injuries including blindness, deafness, difficulty in breathing and lack of courage,

Many women whose husbands were incapacitated in some way had to go out to work in order to have money to buy food, clothes, coal etc. It is possible that the sisters began to look after small children in the Convent in order to let the mothers go out to work.

Just as the Sisters had done in Castle Street, Covent Garden, they spent much time visiting these families, mostly to give them sympathy, advice, encouragement – and praying with them.

It is estimated that 9 million people died in World War 1, and their deaths are commemorated throughout England on around 37,000 war memorials. Because most of the service men who died in the great war on the battlefields, many of whose bodies were never recovered for a proper burial, their families in England and Ireland did not have a grave in a cemetery to visit, place flowers on etc., so war memorials were erected in most towns, villages, even streets, where the names of those who had sacrificed their lives in France, Belgium and Germany could be recorded and honoured.

The dangers and casualties of the First World War were different to those of the Second World War, so the ways in which the Sisters helped the people were different. From 1914-1918, husbands and sons, fathers and brothers of the parishioners were fighting, being wounded, gassed, blinded, taken prisoner, reported missing in the trenches and battlefields of France and Belgium. The Sisters would visit the families of these men to offer sympathy, condolence and prayers and to help in any way they could to ease the pain of loss.

At the close of the First World war, the winter of 1918/19, a 'flu pandemic swept the world killing more people than the estimated 9 million who died in the war itself. It killed 1,500 people in East and West Ham, London alone. The fact that so many died tells us that health standards were very low. As a result it became law for local councils to provide ante and post-natal clinics, child welfare centres and day nurseries. Also a Housing and Town Planning act was passed in 1919, which required local councils to look at housing in their area and provide for any need. In effect, the state was offering money for slum clearance, but many tenants were frightened to leave their appalling conditions for fear of being charged higher rents than they could afford. In 1939 twenty years after the Town Planning act was passed, many slums remained standing in East London and it was to be the Second World War of 1939-1945 and the blitz that cleared them.

When the Second World War began on 3rd September 1939, London was prepared for extensive bombing. A week before it began, 690,000 children were evacuated from London to safer provincial areas. Two Sisters went with the children from St Francis School, Stratford to Colchester.

By the time the actual blitz (the bombing of London, began in September 1940, many children had returned to their homes. For six months there was a sustained bombardment of London, which produced 71 major air-raids during which 20,000 Londoners were killed

At first German aircraft attacked military and port facilities, for example the docks, but in alleged retaliation for British attacks on German cities, the bombing became more indiscriminate. Londoners were forced to spend sleepless nights in the air-raid shelters and Underground stations. The bombing cut gas, water and electricity supplies and caused transport chaos after heavy air-raids. Many families returned to their homes after spending the night in an air-raid shelter, to find the house which had been their home, just a smouldering heap of wood and bricks with everything they possessed, furniture, clothes, bedding children's toys etc consumed by the fire. These were the people to whom the Sisters went to give aid, during much of the wartime, to console, encourage and help in practical ways

Most families in Stratford and the surrounding areas were extremely poor. When their menfolk went to war it meant that the breadwinner was no longer around, so mothers had to find work in order to procure money with which to buy food, clothing, fuel, pay the rent and all the other things that a family needs. Many women began working in factories because the men had gone to fight in the trenches to prevent England being invaded, and all kinds of supplies for ordinary families as well as the army, still had to be produced. Many women worked in ammunition factories filling shells with high explosive powder T.N.T. to be used against the enemy.

These women were called the "Canary Girls" because T.N.T. which is a toxic substance gave them jaundice and made their skin turn yellow. There were some

terrible explosions in some factories which killed many of the women working in them.

We think that the Sisters living in Stratford at that time offered to look after small children during the day so that Mothers could get employment and thus earn some money to pay their bills. They knew that their children would be safe with the Sisters.

If the father of the family was killed in the fighting, the mother would receive a war widows pension but it was only about one shilling (old money) per week. It did not compensate in any way for the loss of her husband the father of her children and the breadwinner of the family. If her husband returned from the war, so badly wounded or disabled that he could no longer be gainfully employed, he received very little to support himself or his family. Many resorted to begging or petty crime in order to survive at all. It was a disgrace to the nation!

Many of the men who did return were maimed or blind or shell-shocked or minus a limb and therefore were unable to work, and for those who returned in one piece there was no work to be had; the country was beleaguered by strikes and demonstrations. By 1921 nearly a quarter of the soldiers who had returned from the war in 1918 were still unemployed. Even those who had won medals for bravery were not sure of getting a job. Many had to pawn their medals in order to provide for their families. The men who had fought for their country felt very let down, even betrayed; their sense of patriotism was completely shattered.

The sisters who lived and worked in Stratford during these years 1914-1921 must have been imbued with the same spirit of reaching out to the poor, sharing their troubles and problems and helping them in whatever way they could – as our first Sisters did with the people they ministered to in the Long Acre/Covent Garden area of London in 1888.

The London Hospital took in some 6,000 wounded and convalescent soldiers. The first batch of 100 were brought from Waterloo in taxis and a fleet of vans loaned by the catering firm of J Lyons and Co. Bethnal Green Hospital became Bethnal Green Military Hospital. The London Chest Hospital specialised in treating casualties of poison gas; there were also local casualties to be treated. On 21st May 1915 there was a Zeppelin raid on the docklands. Bromley-by-Bow was bombed in 1916; one bomb hit the Black Swan at the junction of Bow Road and Bromley High Street, killing four occupants. Most horrifying of all was the bombing on 13th June 1917 of Upper North Street Primary School which became known as the Poplar Outrage. The incident was part of the first German daylight raid on the capital which was to prove twice as lethal as any other of the entire war, killing 97 persons and injuring 439 others. Flying from occupied Belgium 17 German bombers attacked East Ham, Liverpool Street, Aldgate and Whitechapel before reaching Poplar where a 110-pound missile crashed through the roof of the School to explode among the five-year olds on the ground floor. Fifteen were killed instantly, three more died of fatal injuries. Twenty-seven were maimed for life.

KETTERING

(This is taken from the information sent by Mrs Margaret Osborne, archivist for Northampton Diocese, October 2004. The following accounts are gleaned from the Diocesan Magazine 1915-1920)

During the years of the First World War 1914-1918 the number of pupils attending the school in Melton Mowbray declined so much that it almost ceased to exist. As was to be expected the boarders went home to be with their families and, as usual in times of war, the normal run of things was often disrupted. But the Convent remained open and strangely enough, as the children decreased in number, the Sisters increased! Two postulants came in 1916, three in 1917 and five in 1918. Six of the ten persevered, thank God. Of the five who came in 1918, only one left to go to America. The other four persevered and are remembered in the history of the Congregation as sister Clare McGoohan, Sister Bernadette McGoohan, Sister Louisa Moyles and Sister Isabella Rutledge. Sister Louisa had taught in an infant school in Ireland before she came to the Convent, and Sisters Clare and Isabella were "cut out for teaching." Using their God-given talents and initiative, they worked very hard and gave the school in Melton a new lease of life. When the Convent and school in Kettering (1914-1918) were unpredictably closed in September 1918, there was a second opening of the school in Melton Mowbray, Sister Seraphina Groghan being the newly appointed headmistress.

The two young Sisters, Louisa and Isabella took responsibility for the running of the school and saw it flourish. The work was hard but they rejoiced to see the classes grow in numbers, the children making progress and the parents, as well as the children, happy with its success. All the classes were held in Tower House – St Joseph's Convent – at that time; the new St Francis School was not built until 1956, but I am jumping ahead in my history by a few years. I will return to the year 1914 when the numbers attending the school in Melton decreased drastically because of the First World War.

With fewer Sisters needed in school the Community was free to face another challenge, that of starting a school in the industrial town of Kettering in the Diocese of Northampton. The population was over thirty-thousand but could not boast of a single catholic school or a Community of Religious Women. It was, therefore, with a warm appreciation that the Parish Priest and his people welcomed the Sisters, by then officially known as Franciscan Minoresses.

It is recorded in the archives of St Edward's Parish, Kettering that, "In October 1914, with the approbation of his Lordship Bishop Ridell, a branch house of the Franciscan Minoresses from Melton Mowbray was opened in the town on Rockingham Road. The Reverend Mother, Mother Francis, who appointed Sister Rose as the local Superior, brought the Sisters. The Community comprised four nuns who commenced a school. The Bishop of Northampton visited the school in 1915.

The archives of the Parish at that time were written in the hand of the then Parish Priest. Father Joseph Tonks who was Parish Priest from 1896-1924 was held in great esteem by his Bishop and fellow priests, having a very kind, fatherly manner. Mother Rose Bourke was both Superior and headmistress and was assisted in the school by Sister Clare McGoohan, Sister Regina Casey and several lay teachers. Sister Paula Battle looked after the teachers and helped with the housework whilst Sister Baptista Hannigan did the cooking

Sister Baptista was a native of Dublin and one of her own sisters was a Poor Clare. She had worked as a cook on a ship before she entered and had consequently travelled to many parts of the world. She was very interested in the Royal Family and had much knowledge about them. She could make very tasty meals out of almost nothing and very often that was just what she had to do because supplies were short. Sister Attracta Keane was a member of the Community for a short while – another very able cook!

Besides teaching children in the school, the Sisters did many other things in the parish. Many lapsed Catholics were brought back to the practice of the faith and the Sisters instructed numerous converts. Parish visiting was undertaken and evening classes for those above primary school age were given. Mother Rose gave music lessons in the evenings.

A Child of Mary group was established in the Parish. They presented Mother Rose with a beautiful silver teapot with her name and the date of presentation inscribed on it. The Sisters were thereby reminded of the affection in which they were held by the people and the pupils of Kettering. For many years this present was cherished in Tower House when the Community sadly returned to Melton.

St Edward's School flourished admirably but numbers increased so rapidly that within five years the Sisters had to rent a larger property and they did not have the necessary means to meet the heavy liabilities thus incurred. Unfortunately the premises, which constituted both Convent and School, was not the property of the Sisters. One day in 1919 it was discovered that the premises had been put up for sale and it was impossible to raise the amount of money required. All efforts to acquire another suitable building in which to conduct a school were unsuccessful so with great reluctance the school and convent came to an abrupt end. The Parish priest wrote, "I and my flock will always consider it a great calamity that the Sisters were forced to leave the town." He never forgot the work that the Franciscan Minoreesses had accomplished in the school at Kettering. He paid the fees for a girl from Kettering to be a boarder at the school in Melton Mowbray when the Sisters returned there after withdrawing from Kettering.

Father Tonks had by now received the title of Canon and he and his housekeeper, Miss North, were always a great support to the Sisters throughout all the struggles which they experienced in the five years of their Apostolate in Kettering. The Canon continued to show personal interest in the growth of the Congregation after they left his parish. His presence in Melton Mowbray at the Profession ceremonies of the Sisters is recorded by his signature in the Profession Register from 1918 until 1921. At each visit he would bring useful presents, books, items of furniture, sets of vestments, altar linen, candlesticks etc. He provided the sanctuary lamp for the chapel in Clova Road, Forest Gate, London in 1926 which was taken to Maldon Essex when the Sisters moved there to open a new school in 19

In 1924 he was appointed the parish priest of Bedford and later Administrator of the Cathedral of Northampton, yet he kept contact with Mother Francis and the Community in Melton Mowbray. It was he who procured the beautiful house called the sanctuary of Gunton, Lowestoft, for the sisters in 1937 which was intended to be run as a home for retired priests, but the beginning of World War II in 1939 made that an impossibility.

Until his death in 1943 he remained a faithful and valued friend of the Minoreesses.

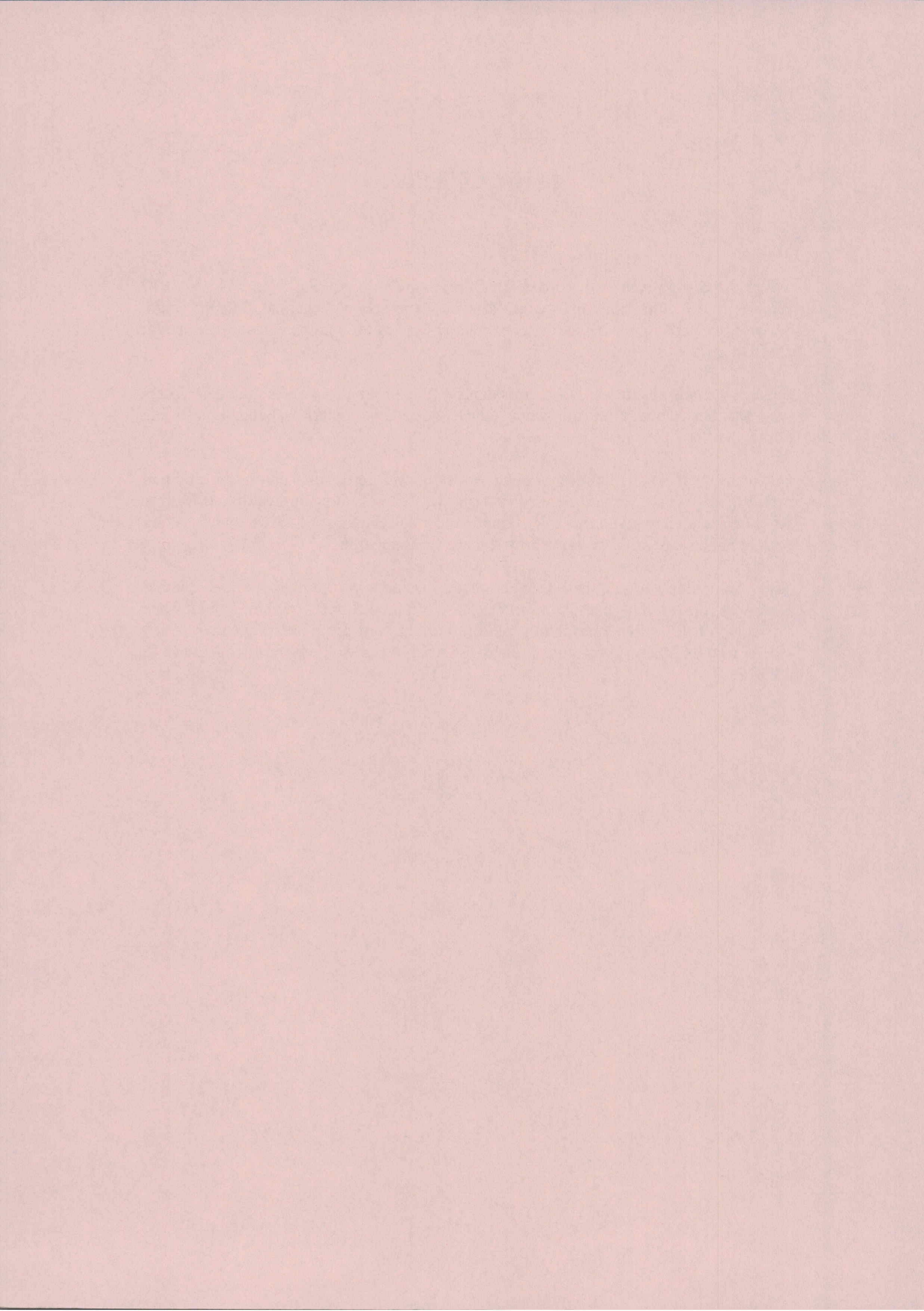
AFTER KETTERING

When the Sisters who had formed the Community in Kettering from 1914 to 1919 rejoined the Community in Melton Mowbray, the school began to flourish again. Many older pupils now came to attend evening classes for commercial subjects taught by the Sisters.

Sister Rose was able to use her many talents in this sphere, as well as the other Sisters who had been conducting the school in her absence – Sisters Isabella, Louisa and Seraphina.

Mother Francis was residing in Tower House at this time, still bearing the title and office of Reverend Mother General, but she was deteriorating in health and Mother Rose (Sisters were given this title if they were made Superior of a Community) took on more and more of the responsibility for the Congregation.

Sister Seraphina Croghan had been the Sister in charge of the School whilst Mother Rose was in Kettering, but when Mother Rose returned Sister Seraphina relinquished the office. In 1925 Sister Seraphina went to London to begin a teaching career which would last for many years. She trained for teaching at Selly Park, Birmingham in 1924.



THE PERSONALITY OF MOTHER FRANCIS

There is no doubt that during the eighteen years that Mother Francis had been a member of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God she showed gifts of initiative, leadership and great courage. All her life as a religious she met with extreme poverty and its consequent anxieties and inconveniences in a spirit of lively faith. One of the phrases most frequently remembered by those who knew her in her lifetime was "Have faith! Have faith!" not only did she possess deep faith herself, but she inspired it in all around her.

For most of her long life she remained the Mother General of the Congregation, and for many years she was the Novice Mistress. She imbued all her Sisters with a deep spirit of prayer. No matter how pressing her duties might be, with unflinching regularity she made the Way of the Cross each evening at 6 o'clock and with it offered her Franciscan Crown Rosary for the souls in Purgatory for whom she had a special devotion. Many Sisters still alive remember saying this way of the Cross in their Novitiate days.

Strict in keeping the Rule and Constitutions (1910 Edition) spiritual exercises and silence, she was particularly firm on poverty in everything, always choosing the poorest and coarsest clothing and food for herself. She impressed this on her Sisters also, though most often there was no choice about whether to do without something or not; there was nothing superfluous of which to deprive oneself!

She was very anxious that the Sisters should avail themselves of opportunities to improve their education.

Mother Francis was a strong and determined character and this determination was most often revealed in her outward composure and rather abrupt manner. She was physically hardy herself and expected others to be the same. As one sister expressed it, "Penance was her style."

When Mother Francis arrived in Melton Mowbray from Nottingham, in December 1900, she was fifty-eight years old, wise from her many years of hardship, but full of energy to begin again in a new setting. Parishioners who still remember her describe her as someone who looked very stern and rather forbidding - see her photograph, our only photograph of her, and judge for yourself, but she was quite different at heart. She was really a very kind and caring person.

There is a story of a gentleman who met her walking through the town, aided by a walking stick, and he stopped to tell her, "I like your Sisters but I don't like your religion." "Neither does the devil," she replied, and went on her way quite unperturbed.

The only words we know for certain that were uttered by our Foundress, Mother Francis Murphy, and which have come down to us through the memories of Sisters who lived and worked with her in the early days of the Congregation (approximately 1900) are two extremely important words, "Have faith."

When Friar Leonard Scutts OFM gathered some stories that the Sisters in the Congregation at that time (1940) were able to tell him about Mother Francis, in order to write a short account of the Congregation, which was duly published by the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, these words, "Have Faith," were very much alive in

the hearts and minds of those Sisters. They are part of our Heritage as Franciscan Minoress Sisters and are recorded in the CTS pamphlet entitled, "Blessed are the Poor" in the Chapter, "A Valiant Leader" from which the following is a quote: behind the achievements made by the Sisters when they arrived in St Edward's Parish, Blue bell Hill, Nottingham, in 1897 was the inspiring influence and understanding affection of Mother Francis, as they all now loved to call her. To the casual observer this tall, well-built and energetic woman may have appeared cold, even domineering, but for her little flock she spent her life, love and work. She never spared herself and took her full share in the humblest tasks. For her, there was no distinction of choir and lay sister, all were equal and dear to her. The weight of care and the heavy responsibility of her growing family could not rob her of the sweet smile or understanding word for her children, and the delightful sense of humour she preserved to the end. But she was now passing through a period of great trial and anxiety. If many had joined her ranks had also left. It became increasingly difficult to preserve her golden rule of self-support, but with it all she never shrank from achieving the treasured ideal and getting her Sisters to do the same. "Have Faith! Have Faith!" was her constant saying and practice.

However pressing her duties might be, with unfailing regularity she made the way of the Cross each evening at 6.00pm and with it offered her Crown Rosary for the Holy Souls in Purgatory for whom she had a special devotion. Thus solid foundations were being well and truly laid." (end of quote)

From whence did Mother Francis get this deep and unfailing constant faith in the providence and goodness of Almighty God? She received this tremendous, supernatural gift initially, along with the gifts of hope and charity, when she was baptised as a tiny child. Then it was nurtured by her devoted parents in the home in which she grew up, in Crossabeg, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland. The practice of the Catholic Faith in all its fullness by her Parents, three sisters and other Members of her Family and Parish would have enabled her to grow in her relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who were surely preparing her to respond to the call to Religious Life which she felt when she was in her late twenties. She would also have learned and received an explanation of the definition of faith, in the catechism and from the governess who was employed by the Family to educate the four daughters.

Daily Bible reading was part of family life when Margaret was growing up and later, Sisters who had lived and worked with Mother Francis would remark, "She seemed to know the Bible by heart." This tells us that, through knowing the Word of God so thoroughly, she knew, believed in, and placed all her trust in the God who can do all things. He never failed her! A prayer which we recite daily in community links Mother Francis with Saint Francis in his trust in Divine Providence, "O God we ask You to help and guide us into the future so that we may continue to do Your work and to follow You more closely after the example of our Holy Father Saint Francis who never doubted Your loving care. Amen."

What was Mother Francis asking her Sisters to have faith in? To have Faith in God Himself, he who can do all things, and to trust that he would always help them, give

them courage to do the work he was asking them to do for Him. It was hard work to care for the poor and the sick.

There were only a few Sisters helping Mother Francis so they were always praying for vocations and they needed great faith that many more would join their small group.

Mother Francis had great faith herself and was able to stimulate it in others by her example and encouragement. Many of the people who had no one to turn to in their need, except Mister Francis and her helpers, learned to have faith in God's Providence themselves through listening to, and following the example of Mother Francis and her helpers. They also had faith in the prayers of the Sisters for them.

Mother Francis had received the gifts of faith, Hope and Charity when she was baptised and she carried on practising all these gifts all her life. She wanted her Sisters to grow in this spirit of Faith, Hope and Charity and the only way to do this was by practising them daily.

She was asking her Sisters to have faith in the Providence of Almighty God. She asked them to read the Bible often as she had done since she was a child, and to ponder on it. She wanted them to follow Saint Francis as their example and to develop in themselves through the Holy Spirit the kind of faith he had.



MOTHER FRANCIS A PERSON OF LOVE AND CONCERN FOR ALL HER

SISTERS

Throughout the diaries which we have, written during the time the Sisters were living in Lett Road, from March 1912 until June 1916, and in Carnarvon Road from June 1916 until August 1926, both places located in Stratford E15, that is, in the East End of London one can discover (trace detect) the care which Mother Francis showed for the Sisters of her Congregation.

It was she who travelled to Stratford E15 with the Sisters who had been chosen to form a Community in an area which was totally different from that in which they had spent most of their lives up to this point. They were used to open countryside, with fields and trees, birds and cattle, but Stratford was a place of many narrow streets and small houses, full of different industries with tall, smoking chimneys and close to a busy railway station. The first House to which they were escorted by Father Thaddeus Hermans OFM, after he had met them at St Pancras station, was very small with no garden at the front and only a very little space at the back in which to hang washing or grow vegetables. After the Sisters had lived there for a while, it is recorded that they acquired a chicken-run and kept some hens!!! Mother Francis sent the hens from Melton Mowbray by rail, and the Sisters collected them from the railway station which was only five minutes walk from Lett Road.

Every few weeks after the Sisters took up residence in St Patrick's Convent, 61 Lett road, there is an entry in the Diary that "The Sisters received a letter from Reverend Mother (Francis). There are also entries stating that "A hamper of vegetables came from Rev. Mother; again "A bag of potatoes came from Rev Mother, and again " A hamper came from Rev Mother containing clothes for the poor also tea, butter, bacon, cornflower and sausages."

Rev Mother would also advise them about what they should do concerning the running of the Convent. For example, they paid rent regularly, £2. 6 shillings every four weeks, but after a particular visit from Mother Francis there is an entry stating "The agent called but did not get his rent until he erected the shed!!" Three days later it is recorded that Mr Dilworth, the agent, called and brought the builder with him and settled with Rev Mother about the shed. Mother Francis was a business woman!

In another entry of the same month, October 1912, "Reverend Mother got us a ton of coal." The weather would have been cold at that time of the year and there were grates for open fires in that little house and Reverend Mother would have been anxious that the Sisters keep well and not develop coughs and colds. Warmth in the house was needed to achieve this. During that first year of the Sisters living and working in Stratford, Reverend Mother Francis visited them frequently, and often stayed with them for a week or more. She always brought something for the Community which was useful, such as a milk churn to churn. From then on it is recorded that the Sisters went regularly to the dairy for milk to churn, sometimes seven quarts, sometimes fifteen.

Hardly a week went by without the entry, "Father Thaddeus paid us a visit." He took special care of the Sisters and was always on hand to give them advice and encouragement.

In November 1912 there is the entry, "Went to London with Reverend Mother, We (Mother Francis and the Superior in Lett Road, and the Sister who wrote the Diary, Sr

Antonia) called at the Irish warehouse and got several orders for lace. Mother Rose, Mother Edith, Sr Paula and Sr Clare (Goohan) were lacemakers and on 18th December went to London with lace, sent lace patterns and letters to Melton." Several times there is the entry, "Lace came from Melton" which indicates that those Sisters who could make lace were helping the Sisters in Stratford by supplying them with articles – collars and cuffs for blouses and dresses- which they could take to shops, for example Bourne and Hollingsworth, Selfridges, and get money for them. The Sisters had no other source of income!

In January 1913 Sister Seraphina began lace-making lessons for young parishioners who wanted to learn; this was very popular at that time. These classes could have taken place in either the Convent or the Parish Hall.

Also in January 1913 is the entry," "Our mangle came from Melton." The Sisters must have wrung out sheets and clothes by hand up to this time, and Mother Francis must have noticed this during her visits and on her return to Melton arranged to send a mangle by rail.

February 9th 1913 was a sad day for the Sisters because Father Thaddeus OFM came to say goodbye as he was leaving the friary in Stratford to go to Woodford on the following Monday. Woodford is not far from Stratford and easy to get to by bus, but it meant that father Thaddeus would no longer be "at hand" and able to call to the Convent very often. However he kept contact with the Sisters in Stratford as the following Diary extract proves, " 12th June 1913. Father Thaddeus came to see us, giving us recreation for that evening and for the whole of the day on 13th."

Father Thaddeus celebrated his Golden Jubilee at Woodford on 14th November 1913 and he died in Woodford Friary on 31st August 1916, being buried in St Patrick's Cemetery, Leytonstone. Perhaps our Sisters were present at one or other of these events.

A further entry reads, "13th June 1913, Feast of St Anthony. Mr Kearney gave us ten shillings going in to church (St Francis Church) to 'get a little something for the feast.'

26th July 1913. Sister Concepta went to Melton Mowbray and took Kate Connolly for a holiday" Kate Connolly was a parishioner of St Francis Church, Stratford, who had prepared the House in Lett Road and had a fire burning in the grate when the Sisters arrived there on 19th March 1912. Throughout the time that the Sisters lived in that House, named St Patrick's Convent, Kate's name is mentioned many times for the cleaning and other jobs that she did regularly. This was a great help to the sisters, especially when they all went out to visit the sick, the elderly, the bereaved etc. Taking Kate to Melton for a holiday was one way of repaying her for all her services to the Stratford Community.

After the Sisters succeeded in finding shops in London that would pay them for making lace for certain garments, they realised that their ability to knit could also be a means of acquiring an income, so we find, recorded in the Lett Road diary on 29th September, "Went to London and got our first order for wool-work 10/- (shillings) worth.(Letter from Reverend Mother.)

The wool - work which the Sisters did was knitting matinee coats, bonnets, bootees, mittens etc. for babies - a work which continued for many, many years, right up to the time the Sisters were running the maternity hospital in Govan, Glasgow, Scotland.

The Sisters who knitted these garment included Sisters Imelda, Dominica, Margaret Mary, Perpetua, Isabella, Antonia and others

Because the Convents in Lett Road and Carnarvon Road, Stratford, were too small to have a room set aside for a chapel where Mass could be celebrated, the Sisters used to walk to St Francis' Church every day for the 7.00am Mass. When the Community moved to Clova Road, Forest Gate, in 1926, the Friars from St Anthony's Friary celebrated Mass in the Convent Chapel once a week, and they were able to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Chapel.

At one time, as had happened several times in Melton Mowbray, the Sisters had so little income to live on that they wondered if they could survive, and the Bishop of Brentwood seriously thought of closing them down. The Friars, however, spoke very highly of the Community, especially the quiet way in which they did their work going around in the parish, and the respect which the people had for them, so they were allowed to continue.

In 1926 the Clova Road Community consisted of Mother Edith Superior, Sister Bernadette McGoohan, Sister Paula Battle, Sister Seraphina and Sister Concepta Stafford. On 29th November 1926, Sister Isabella joined the Community from Melton and evening classes for commercial subjects commenced with ten girls.

The Stratford and Forest Gate parishioners were very generous to the Sisters and some of their many gifts are recorded in the diaries of the three Houses. Just to mention one or two.

Near Christmas 1929 it is recorded, "Mr Renfrew sent a piece of beef and brussel sprouts; Mother Edith was given a ham and sausages; Mr Burton sent a cake; Mr Kearney sent a turkey and fruit; Miss King brought flowers; Sister Seraphina was given a goose."

Some entries make one smile, for example 15th January 1927, "We bought a new pedestal for St Anthony's statue!" Was that because the Sisters were now in the Franciscan Parish of St Anthony after whom the Parish Church and Friary are named?

Mother Francis in later years occasionally spoke to the Sisters about her work among the poor Irish families in various parts of London, particularly Soho, Stratford, and the Woolwich Dockyards, near Poplar. This visiting was mostly carried out on Saturdays and Sundays when the Sisters were successively in Lett Road, Carnarvon Road and Clova Road. For many years it was Sisters Paula, Rita, Antonia and Bernadette who did this whilst Sisters Seraphina, Isabella and Imelda taught Sunday School.

On one day a week Sister Rita and Sister Imelda would travel by 'bus to Custom House, another dock area, to visit and help the poor families there. The teaching sisters also took turns to visit these families and give them catechism instruction under the direction of Father Carless, a German priest. Sister Rita McLaughlin continued this work until her health deteriorated and she returned to the mother House in Melton Mowbray where she died in May 1944. She was laid to rest at Eastwell, Leicestershire beside Mother Clare McGoohan who had died in 1935.

DEATH OF MOTHER FRANCIS

In 1925 the person who had been the inspiration for all these good works was in her eighty-third year and residing in Melton Mowbray. The outstanding merit of Mother Francis' long and arduous life was surely the fact that she so resolutely carried out her high ideals and perseveringly grappled with the difficulties that must have arisen in their achievement. To spend oneself and be spent in the service of God's poor, yet to maintain and preserve the exacting principle of self-support, called for great courage and nobility of soul. She was now bed-ridden and passing her days in prayer and pain.

In the early months of 1927 there were signs that her heart was weakening. Her Sisters bestowed loving care upon her and she was keenly appreciative of the smallest attention. Her love for the souls in Purgatory seemed to deepen during these days and shortly before her own passing one day she asked the Sister if she knew how to recite the Office of the Dead. "Yes Mother," the Sister replied. "then please offer it for a dear friend of mine who has just passed away." The following evening the post brought news that a certain priest who had been a staunch admirer of Mother Francis and her work, had been called to God.

With the approach of winter she began to sink rapidly. A heavy drowsiness would reduce her for hours to a state of semi-consciousness, but in her more lucid moments she would pray constantly. She endured much pain. Her life was slowly ebbing away and none could cherish illusions about her recovery. With the simplicity and gladness of a child going home, she received the Sacraments of the Church. Her sisters kept prayerful vigil at her bedside during those bleak winter nights.

At one o'clock in the morning of Christmas Eve 1927, Mother Francis died. She was eighty-five years old and had been a religious for fifty-seven years. The funeral service was a simple one with but a few mourners present. The cortege wound its way from the Convent Chapel on Dalby Road to the Parish Church of St John the Baptist at Thorpe End where her remains were laid to rest under a shroud of snow in the small plot beside the Church.

As Father Leonard Scutts OFM said of her, 'Mother Francis loss was indeed great for she had possessed that depth of spirituality, allied with a keen mind and quick wit that makes a born leader of souls, and fitted her to be the instrument used by God to lead others on the way of sanctity.'

The following tribute was printed in the Melton Times on Friday December 30th 1927.

DEATH OF MOTHER SUPERIOR

The local Catholic Community has suffered an irreparable loss by the death of the Mother Superior of the Franciscan Convent (Mother Mary Francis) which occurred on Saturday morning. The deceased lady who was eighty-five years of age had been in failing health for sometime past. Recently she appeared to make a splendid recovery but then had a relapse. She arrived in Melton about thirty years ago in order to found the Franciscan Convent and School. This was first established in Thorpe End and afterwards carried on for a brief period at the Manor House Burton Street before taking up permanent quarters at the Tower House, Dalby Road. The funeral was on Wednesday 26th December 1927 when the Reverend father Hayes of Nottingham Cathedral conducted a Requiem Mass at the Convent, the internment subsequently taking place at the Church cemetery beside St John's Church. The Rev father Chapman and the Rev. Father Hayes officiated. The mourners included the staff of the Franciscan Convent and a number of members of the Congregation also attended. Mr R Stevens carried out the funeral arrangements. Mr Brisley was the organist.

Mother Rose Bourke who had always been close to Mother Francis, signing papers and registers on her behalf for at least two years before her death succeeded Mother Francis as the person in charge of the Congregation, although she was never formally elected as Mother General. She was a talented, charming and very lovable person who had been Novice Mistress since 1920 when Mother Francis had resigned that Office due to declining health. Mother Rose had been free to take on this responsibility when she returned to Melton from Kettering towards the end of 1919

ANXIOUS DAYS

In the years that followed Mother Francis' death things did not look very bright for the Congregation. Many Sisters developed serious illnesses and several were sent home to Ireland to recover their health and strength. One consoling event happened in 1930 which was to be of great help the Congregation; the Friars Minor made a foundation in St Edward's Parish Blue Bell Hill in Nottingham from whence the Sisters had come to Melton Mowbray thirty years previously. Father Leo was the first Guardian of this Friary with Fathers Brendan and Leonard coming later. All the Friars gave their support and practical help in many different ways.

In 1931 there were eight novices and young professed sisters in the Novitiate, and very little to live on.

In the spring of 1932 Mother Rose Bourke, who had been in the Congregation for thirty-four years and fulfilled so many offices during that time, took ill and in July she was sent to the cancer hospital in London to undergo an operation. She returned in September with no improvement. Two months later Sister Elizabeth Clarke, who had made her First Profession on 20th December the previous year, died of consumption on 2nd November, feast of the Holy Souls. She was just twenty-one years old. She was buried beside Mother Francis in St John's churchyard.

It must have been a very sad Christmas for the Community in Melton in 1932. Sister Elizabeth had recently died, it was the fifth anniversary of the death of Mother Francis and it was evident that Mother Rose would not live much longer. Her death occurred on 2nd January 1933, the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. She is also buried beside Mother Francis in St John's churchyard. Humanly speaking the future looked very black indeed.

Mother Rose was succeeded by Mother Clare McGoohan.

Little conveniences and oftentimes the very necessities of life had to be sacrificed one after another and the wonder of it all is that the Franciscan Minoreesses ever survived; but there was one thing they never sacrificed, in fact it was a quality that grew stronger as the difficulties became greater, and that was their faith and confidence in the good God. "Have faith! Have faith!" Mother Francis had so often said, "God will provide."

He did provide, not only by sending the Friars but also by giving them another friend whose wise council and fatherly encouragement restored to them that confidence in themselves and their latent abilities that is so vital in public life – his Lordship the Bishop of Nottingham, Dr McNulty. He had succeeded Bishop Dunn in 1932 and realised the sterling worth of this small group of Franciscan Sisters. He knew of the extremities to which they were reduced and visited Melton Mowbray with the intention of closing the Convent, but when he saw the quality of the Sisters who were there – Sisters Benigna, Monica, Perpetua, Attracta, Dominica, Teresa, Josephine and Colette, to name but a few, he changed his mind, urging instead that the younger members be trained as professional nurses immediately. This suggestion was received with gratitude and was acted upon without delay. Reverend Mother Clare McGoohan, who had already been diagnosed with cancer, gave Sister Perpetua Gray permission to write to the matron of St John and St Elizabeth's Hospital, London, for a place on the Nursing Course. Later, Sisters Perpetua and Agatha Brady both sought admission to

Catholic Hospitals in England and Ireland, but all found reasons for not being able to accept poor Franciscans! It came as a shock to the Sisters to realise that when dealing with the ways of the world it is not what you know but whom you know that matters, and that the unforgivable sin is poverty!

The non-catholic matron of the Isolation Hospital in Melton Mowbray suggested to Mother Clare (McGoohan) that the Sisters be sent, in secular dress, to a non-catholic training school, this apparently being the only way to receive training. When Bishop McNulty was asked for permission to do this he willingly gave his consent. A man ahead of his time! With the approval and blessing of the Bishop, the first probationers entered a public institution on November 22nd 1933 – Sisters Benigna and Philomena began their training at the City Hospital Nottingham and a week later Sisters Monica and Perpetua began at the Royal Hospital in Halifax.

The Community was so poor that it was a struggle to purchase the necessary nursing uniforms for those in training. Nevertheless they were obtained and thus the four Sisters bravely faced out into unfamiliar surroundings and way of life. They felt very keenly the fact that they could not wear their religious habit or follow their religious exercises publicly, however, they knew that it was for the good of their struggling Congregation, so they worked hard, prayed well and persevered, until in due time they gained their Nursing certificates which were to prove so valuable.

In the meantime the Sisters in Melton Mowbray were living a very austere life because their income was so small. It was the time of the economic depression in England and people did not have the money to pay fees for their children to attend a private boarding school, such as Melton was, even though the fees were very small. Despite the sacrifices entailed both for the Community and the trainees, another Sister, Cecilia began training. In order to supplement their small income the Sisters in Melton, Attracta, Dominica, Teresa, Josephine, Christina, Benedicta, Augusta, Anna, Juliana, Concilio and Colette spent many hours doing needlework on vestments for Vanpoules and children's woollen garments for Paton and Baldwins (who had a factory in Melton) and other firms. The work was exacting and the pay very little, but mouths had to be fed!

In April 1935 after much suffering and despite several operations to relieve the cancer Mother Clare McGoohan died on Holy Saturday, the fifth Minoress to die in three years – Sister Elizabeth Clarke, mother Rose Bourke, Sister Concepta Stafford and Sister Catherine Kilcullen. The others struggled on so valiantly under the new leadership of Mother Edith Howlett, a frail, gracious lady, that in the following year 1936 a new foundation was made in Belper Derbyshire.

In 1936 when Mother Edith became Reverend Mother there was hardly any money "in the kitty." A catholic family in the town by the name of Salt owned a fish and poultry shop and one day a chicken was delivered to the Convent from the shop. Mother Edith, not realising that it was a gift, sent it back with one of the Sisters because she had not the money to pay for it. Every Friday after that, a basket of fish was sent to the Convent as a gift from the Salt Family. They also provided bags of coal when the Sisters couldn't afford fuel. Many times there wasn't sufficient money at the end of the week to pay for the bread and unpaid bills would accumulate, but Beavers, the baker from whom the Sisters bought their bread, never demanded

payment because they knew that the bills would be paid as soon as the money came in.

When Sisters, Monica, Perpetua, Benigna and Philomena went out training they received a small salary which was duly sent to Melton, thus the outstanding bills were paid.

Unhappily, illness continued to strike the Sisters in Melton and in January 1937 Mother Edith who had been Mother General since the death of Mother Rose in 1933, developed pneumonia and within a fortnight was being sadly mourned by her Sisters as she was laid to rest beside Mother Francis in St John's churchyard, Melton. By her loving personality, gentleness and kindness Mother Edith had gained the love and respect of all among whom she had worked in Nottingham, London and Melton. She was only sixty-four years of age when she died, having spent thirty-eight years in God's service. A true Franciscan in her love for Holy Poverty and simplicity of life, it was fitting that she received Holy Viaticum at the hands of Father Valerian OFM, Guardian of the Friary in Nottingham and that Fathers Leonard, Dennis and Valerian came from the Friary for her funeral

Mother Louisa Moyles was elected as Mother General and one of her first joys, among the many sorrows, was to see those Sisters who had gone out courageously three years previously receive their State Qualifications as Nursing Sisters. Mother Louisa immediately made white habits for them and, due mainly to the untiring interest and zeal of father Leonard Scutts OFM, a steady list of private patients who needed nursing began. The Sisters travelled out to the homes of people in Leicester, Nottingham, Duffield and different villages around Melton Mowbray. With several Sisters now State qualified, the prospects of opening a Nursing Home were becoming more concrete.

Again at the suggestion of good Father Leonard OFM Reverend Mother Louisa wrote to Mother Francis, Foundress of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood at Guilford requesting that she would take two Sisters for a while to learn the administration of a Religious Nursing Home. Mother Francis kindly acceded to the request saying that the Sisters could go immediately if they wished, which they did. Acting upon advice given by Mother Francis FMDM Sister Monica entered a Birmingham Nursing Home to get theatre experience before going to Guilford with Sister Perpetua. The Sisters enjoyed a most happy and beneficial two weeks with the FMDM Sisters for which they and the whole Congregation will be eternally grateful. Not only did the two Sisters learn much that would help them with the hoped-for Nursing Home, but also Mother Francis was most generous with gifts of all kinds for the Congregation. Learning that the Sisters had begun to say the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin she presented Reverend Mother Louisa with several copies as a parting gift.

