

## Chapter 43 – Tralee, Ireland

### *Called to the Emerald Isle*

From the early days of our Congregation daughters of Erin have come to swell the ranks of the Dominicans of King William's Town. Now the time came for our Sisters to serve Ireland, albeit in a small way. But let us take a brief look at the history of this land;

- Although Ireland's independence dates from as late as 1922 she is an ancient state. Archaeologists say that men settled there as far back as 6000 B.C. There are no fewer than 1200 ancient remains from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age; but little is now known of the people who built them.

The basic Irish character (along with the country's culture, language, love of conversation and sense of humour) was inherited from a later people, the Galls, who invaded the island somewhere around 500 B.C. They were a branch of the Celtic family which occupied the greater parts of the European continent before the rise of the Roman Empire. The modern Irish language (Gaelic) still strongly resembles the language that was spoken in those far-off days. Today, however, nearly everyone in Ireland speaks English although, on coming into contact with the Irish, one notices that they have their own "special brand" of English.

The Romans invaded Britain but never came as far as Ireland although the Irish were converted to Christianity by St Patrick who came from Britain in the fifth century. While the people accepted the new religion they contrived to hold on to some of their ancient legends as well. By the time the Barbarian hordes had wiped out the Roman Empire and plunged Europe into the Dark Ages, Ireland had many centres of culture and learning and was then known as "the Island of Saints and Scholars". Many monasteries of men and women flourished there at the time and colonies of monks spread Christianity in Europe, having crossed the Irish Sea in frail boats. The Book of Kells in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, is reckoned among the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts in the world.

The Viking sea-rovers invaded Ireland and started building cities in 840 A.D., among them Dublin, Waterford and Limerick. The first Irish castles were built by the Norsemen who came in 1169. In time these invaders adopted the Irish language and the Irish style of life.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century England began its penetration of Ireland. The province of Ulster, controlled by the Irish lords, remained untouched by the English influence. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century groups of Scottish Presbyterians settled in Ulster and north-east Ulster became thoroughly Presbyterian. After the English Reformation Oliver Cromwell also invaded Ireland and settled many of his soldiers in North Leinster. Many Irish Catholics were thus driven westward to Connaught. The Catholics were severely oppressed and made victims of harsh penal laws. The people grew embittered and strove vainly to thrust off their oppressors.

The potato famine cut the population in half, for potatoes and mild then formed the staple diet of the Irish. Many died of starvation but many more emigrated to America although public relief works were organised during the dreadful time.

The movement to effect Catholic emancipation in Ireland to establish self-government finally found a champion in Daniel O'Connell. In 1829 the Government was obliged to pass the Catholic Emancipation Bill. A group, called the "Sinn Fein" (Gaelic for 'Ourselves alone') was organised in 1905, which struggled for Home Rule. In 1916 occurred the "Easter Revolution" but it was suppressed within a few days. In the following year a convention was announced that would draft a Constitution for the counties that would form the Irish Republic in the south. At this convention the victory of the republicans was climaxed by the election of Eamon De Valera. In 1921 Lloyd George met with De Valera and a treaty was effected in the name of the Irish Free State. This Government of Southern Ireland remained in effect until 1927, when a new Constitution was

approved by the “Dail Eirann”. Peaceful efforts were made to bring Northern Ireland into accord with Eire, but to no avail; the six northern counties still belong to England.

Ireland stands on the Atlantic side of Europe, right in the path of the Gulf Stream which gives it its milder climate than Europe. The island is only about 300 miles long and 200 miles wide. The Country has a vast variety of scenery. Cork is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city of Eire and is its principal port. The lakes of Killarney have become synonymous with beauty the world over. In the South of Ireland the old enmity between Catholics and Protestants is today practically extinct.

Very Rev Father Tom Hickey, Provincial of the Rosminian Fathers of Charity had begged for Sisters to help them in their orphanage and home for boys at Upton in County Cork. Mother General Demetria, in South Africa, had instructed the Prioress at Hinckley Convent to arrange for Sisters de Mercede Joyce, Bernette Nolan and Christella Ewals to set out for Upton on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1946.

Mother Ambrose herself accompanied these pioneers and, as they landed from “Innisfallen” the Fathers were waiting to take them to their new home. What a welcome they received after the 15 miles drive from Cork to Upton! Father Provincial offered up for their intentions a Mass of welcome. After breakfasting in the Oak room the nuns were taken to Rosary Cottage. The little house was “home” indeed; it was fully furnished with glowing fire in the sitting room and flowers prepared by one of the boys. The gem of the cottage was the little private chapel with the altar ready to receive the Blessed Sacrament the following day.

Mother Ambrose stayed with the Sisters until 1<sup>st</sup> November. Before her departure she assigned the work to be done by each Sister. Sister Christella was to supervise the boys’ dormitories; Sister Bernette would put order into the children’s kitchen and would then take charge of the main kitchen which catered for the Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and the secular staff. Sister de Mercede was in charge of the little community and, as a nurse, she was made Infirmarian. Exact reports of each boy’s health were kept from the time of arrival until the age of sixteen. There were regular visits from the dentist and medical doctors; and it was not unusual to have a hundred boys in bed during an outbreak of children’s disease.

Fathers O’Leary and Downey were in charge of boys of whom there were well over 200 on the roll. Tuition was given by secular teachers. Every afternoon the lads had training in various industries: carpentry, shoemaking, cooking, tailoring and farming, while the smaller boys went to the knitting shop where Sister Alfredina Bertchmann taught them also to knit and darn socks. Afterwards the kitchen was taken over by Sister Wilhelma Enzendberger when Sister Bernette left on transfer to Stoke Golding, England. The nuns worked zealously and also renovated the church vestments to help the sacristan. The Fathers greatly appreciated the help of the nuns and it was only shortage of staff that caused Mother Aquilina Spiegel to inform them that she was regretfully obliged to withdraw her Sisters. Sadly, on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1955, the four who then formed the community, took their departure.

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In 1952 the Congregation had bought a nursing home in Bandon, County Cork. The old antipathy between Protestants and Catholics was, by now, a thing of the past in the Republic of Ireland. But Bandon town had been a Protestant stronghold where Catholics were formerly not allowed to enter. A story is told that the old town gate bore this notice: “Protestant, Jew or Pagan may freely enter here, only no Papist.” Beneath it this retort was printed, presumably by a Catholic: “He who wrote these words wrote them well, for the same is writ on the gates of hell!”

The house the Sisters bought had been built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it was reputed to have accommodated Oliver Cromwell on a visit to the town. The building had three storeys with only a very small backyard. Over the years the house gloried in various names, among others, *Temperance Hotel* and *Soup House*. Here, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the great famine in Ireland, soup and other provisions were distributed to the poor. When better times came, a Miss Beamish, a good Protestant Christian, converted the house into a Nursing Home where, for 25 years, she and her staff gave kind and skilled nursing care to all, irrespective of their religion. On her retirement in 1946 the property was bought by three Misses

Donovan, two of whom, Hannah and Mary, were still there when, in 1952, Mother Demetria Hemmer acquired it to be a filial of Hinckley Convent, and named it St Philomena's Nursing Home. (The name was afterwards changed to St Michael's)

The pioneers of this venture were Sisters Anita Schott and Mariette Gouws, who came from South Africa by the "Stirling Castle" via England. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1952 Mother Madeleine Stamm of Hinckley Convent accompanied the two nuns to Bandon where the Misses Donovan were still in possession. When the Sisters had called at St Philomena's to announce their arrival they returned to Rosary Cottage, Upton, where they spent another night before taking over their new home.

There were many initial difficulties. When the Sisters had been shown over the property they realised that their house needed renovation from roof to foundation. Some days later they also discovered to their dismay that their South African Midwifery Certificates were not recognised by the Irish Nursing Board because there was no reciprocity between the Nursing Councils of the two countries. The Sisters thus found themselves obliged to ask Miss Donovan's Night Nurse, who possessed an Irish Certificate, to stay on for a time.<sup>1</sup>

After this came another crushing blow. The Sisters had chosen a room as a chapel and spent what little money they had in doing it up. Meanwhile Mother Athanasius Zech had also arrived from Venlo to join the community, bringing with her large cases that contained a complete outfit for a chapel and many other useful things for a new foundation, which had been given her by the generous Netherlanders. However, Bishop Lucy of Cork refused to give the necessary permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament at St Philomena's. His Lordship's argument was that the nuns were not very far from the Parish Church. Sorrow filled the hearts of the Sisters but nothing would induce the Prelate to alter his decision.

These difficulties were gradually overcome by the perseverance of the Sisters and the generous help offered by many of the good Irish people. Chief among their early benefactors were the Rosminian Fathers of Upton;<sup>2</sup> Very Rev Father Reginald Harrington O.P. and his community at St Mary's Priory, Cork; Misses Mary and Anne Reeves;<sup>3</sup> Doctor and Mrs J MacDonald; Doctors E Callanan, J Crowley, J O'Sullivan, T Feehily, Mr and Mrs Patrick Brennan, Mr J Neville, Mr J O'Mahony and the Presentation Sisters who conducted a school in town.

The Sisters renovated the old house completely so that by 1957 they had an up-to-date little nursing home that was patronised by the Doctors and citizens of Bandon and surrounding small towns.

In the meantime, too, Bishop Lucy granted the Sisters the great privilege of having the Blessed Sacrament reserved in St Michael's Nursing Home. This favour was obtained in 1965, at the kindly intervention of Most Rev Msgr Sensi, the Papal Nuncio.

When our house at Bandon had been in existence for eight years the Bon Secour Sisters built a large maternity hospital in the neighbouring city of Cork where there were also specialist doctors available. So, in time, St Michael's hardly justified its existence as a Maternity Home in Bandon. Furthermore, if our convent in Ireland was to serve as a collecting house for vocations there was need of accommodation for prospective postulants. Such accommodation was lacking at St Michael's. Our Sisters were, therefore, on the lookout for a better property somewhere in Ireland.

In 1966 a few casual remarks from various sources led to enquiries being made about starting a Home for the Aged at Tralee, in County Kerry. After much prayer permission was received on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1967 for our Congregation to establish a foundation in Tralee. A property known as "Oak Villa" was finally purchased from Mr McLatchford, and named "*Fatima Convent*". The premises were inspected by Dr Walshe, M.O.H. of Dublin, who suggested various alterations necessary to render the house suitable as a home for senior citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Later Sister Declan Daly came from South Africa to undergo further training at Drogheda in order to gain the Midwifery Certificate of the Irish Nursing Board.

<sup>2</sup> Situated about 6 Km from Bandon.

<sup>3</sup> Sisters to Father JB Reeves O.P. These ladies lived in Cork.

St Michael's Nursing Home, Bandon was put up for sale in January 1968 but was, in actual fact, sold much later. On 28<sup>th</sup> January Sisters de Montfort Coyle and Alban Kenny said farewell to Bandon and moved to Tralee, where they were later joined by Mother Hilda Moloney who had been Vicarress of the English District. On 8<sup>th</sup> April the first Mass was said and the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Sisters' oratory by Right Rev Msgr Lane, the Parish Priest of Tralee. Two young ladies soon came to try their vocations to the religious life, one of whom persevered and is known as Sister Ann Theresa Smith.

Plans were made for the new home for senior citizens by Messrs Patrick O'Sullivan and Partners of Killarney, and the building was erected by Messrs King Brothers. Work on the project was begun in July 1969. On 25<sup>th</sup> November 1970, a Feast of St Catharine of Alexandria (one of the Protectors of the Dominican Order), the new single-storey Home with its attractive chapel was opened and blessed by His Lordship Right Rev. Dr Eamon Casey. The Prelate was also the principal celebrant at a special concelebrated Mass. The large gathering that attended the ceremony included Priests and Religious of various orders, members of the County Council, the Tralee Urban Council and a large cross-section of the business community of the various professions. Mother General Fromunda Zimmermann had also come from South Africa for the occasion...

A letter from the community at Tralee relates that one of their latest arrivals is a Sister of Mercy from Limerick, who is confined to a wheelchair. "Here one remembers how grateful our Congregation should be to Mother Jacoba Zirn for her foresight in providing the 'Mater Infirmorum' for our retired and ailing Sisters, and that at a time when homes for elderly religious were not thought of..."

In the same letter the Sisters tell of another addition to their residents at Tralee is "a newly ordained priest of 78 years, Father Ahearn – a retired Bank Manager and widower with a large grown-up family. When he went home a few days ago to baptise his grandson some of our elderly residents found this difficult to believe..." He is still active and an exemplary priest and has been appointed as chaplain to our Home in Tralee.

So our Sisters continue their work of mercy for the elderly in County Kerry and endeavour to serve the Emerald Isle in this small way.