

The Sisters of Saint Clare in Kenmare 1861 – 2011.

In memory of 150 years of service.

In the year 1212 when Saint Clare founded an order of nuns there were some differences immediately evident that set the Poor Clare Sisters apart from other Orders :-

- 1 separation from the world, that is, Enclosure
- 2 the pursuit of radical poverty
- 3 the fostering of mutual love and peace.

Clare wrote that she wished each of her followers would be “*a co - worker of God Himself and a support of the weak members of His Body.*” She wanted her Sisters “*to follow the footprints of Christ Himself, to choose to live in the Cloister and to serve the Lord in highest poverty so that...they may be the Lord's servants.*” In 1861 when Mother Michael O'Hagan and her six companions arrived from Newry to set up a Poor Clare foundation in Kenmare these ideals of Saint Clare were of paramount importance at a time and in a place ravaged by the effects of the Great Famine. They came at the invitation of Father John O'Sullivan P.P. who, by this time, had built ten National Schools and had a Convent and School almost ready for occupation. For two years the Presentation Sisters had a School in Kenmare but they returned to Castleisland in 1861. He had not yet commenced the building of Holy Cross Church.

After a long and difficult journey the Sisters arrived at Rose Cottage, Kenmare, on the 24th of October 1861 – the Feast of the Archangel Raphael patron of travellers. As soon as they arrived they prepared an Oratory for Mass. On the following day they set about the twin tasks of feeding poor children and teaching all who came to them. A kitchen was set up in the coach house at the rear of Rose Cottage and Father O'Sullivan, with the help of Mother O'Hagan, made tables for the children's use. Within a very short time over 200 children were fed hot porridge for breakfast and bread at lunchtime every day. When the Sisters tried to introduce meat into the diet they discovered that the children were so unfamiliar with meat they were completely disgusted and were not able to eat it. Clothing was another problem so Father O'Sullivan provided flannel and tweed for the children. The tradition of providing clothing for children was carried on by the Nuns until the 1960s.

Classes were set up in the disused Brewery which was close by Rose Cottage. This building had served as an Auxiliary Workhouse accommodating between 500 and 900 destitute children during the Famine. On May Day 1862 the pupils moved to the new Convent School which was opened and blessed by Father O'Sullivan. In that same year there were 385 students on the Rolls, by 1864 there were 633. Numbers remained above 500 until the 1870s. In 1867 the following tribute was paid to the Poor Clare Convent School by Mr. Keenan, the Chief Inspector of National Education:

“ The Kenmare Convent School, which opened so recently as the close of the year 1861, and which is far away in the remote wilds of Kerry, has already sent forth, through its monitorship, truly competent – indeed accomplished – teachers to do service in National Schools; a number exactly equal to the aggregate number of female teachers that issued from the monitorships of the Model Schools of Derry, Omagh, Newtown-Stewart, Newtownards, Lurgan, Sligo, Galway, Kilkenny, Enniscorthy, Waterford, Limerick and Cork—all of them taken together during the last twelve years.”
This testimony is a great compliment to the astonishing work of both teachers and pupils.

In 1852 Father John had founded a Lace – making School in Shelbourne Street to provide a livelihood for destitute girls from the Workhouse. Ten years later Mother O'Hagan took over this work and started the Kenmare Convent Lace School which taught flat-point lace, appliqué, guipure and

Venetian rose – point lace. The Lace – work of the Kenmare Nuns and pupils became famous in London, Paris, New York and Chicago. The list of prizes won by Kenmare pupils at international exhibitions is impressive when one considers that the teaching was done by Sisters who never left the Cloister. Examples of their work are now exhibited and cared for in the Heritage Centre, Kenmare.

Sister Mary Catherine Dugdale was still a Novice when the nuns came and she was professed on Saint John's Day, June 24th 1862. Her family was in England and unable to travel to Kenmare for the celebrations so the Sisters invited other special guests to join them for the day. Mother O'Hagan herself lit the first fire in the new Convent to cook dinner for one hundred poor children who were the guests of Sister Catherine and her companions. From the time of their arrival these Sisters exemplified the ideals of Saints Clare and Francis by their love of the Poor. Shortly after this Profession the Nuns moved into their new School and Convent, on 12th July 1862.

The seven founding Sisters and their successors served the children of the locality in their Primary, Secondary Top and Secondary Schools nurturing their pupils in body, mind and soul. They educated them out of the extreme post – Famine poverty in which they found them. Many of these pupils had no prospects in life apart from the emigrant ship but they were well prepared to be good citizens of England, Australia, the United States or any other country in which they found themselves. Their letters home with the Pounds or the Dollars sustained those left behind. Now that times have vastly improved (in some respects) we must not forget the debt of gratitude owed to Father John O'Sullivan and the seven Pioneering Sisters who blazed the trail for those who followed them.

The Nun of Kenmare.

Sister Mary Francis Clare was born Margaret Cusack in Dublin on May 6th 1829 to Dr. Samuel Cusack and his wife Sarah Stoney and was baptised into the Episcopalian faith. In her early teens Margaret went to live in Devon with her mother and brother Samuel. When she was 18 or 19 she was engaged to marry Charles Holmes but on a visit to her sick father in Ireland she learned that Charles had died suddenly. Shortly afterwards her father died and in her bereavement she turned to Religion for consolation. For a while she was a follower of Dr. Pusey and in 1850 she entered a Community of Anglican Sisters in London. In 1858 she told Dr. Pusey of her decision "to try Rome." On July 2nd 1858 she was received into the Catholic Church by a Fr. Patterson. Shortly afterwards she was confirmed by Cardinal Wiseman who urged her to devote her life to Catholic literature. In 1859 Margaret joined the Poor Clare Sisters in Newry, Co. Down and took the name in religion of Sister Francis Clare. She then began her literary career with her first book *Saint Francis and the Franciscans* and until his death in 1865 she was encouraged by Cardinal Wiseman.

The number of books written and published by Sister Francis Clare is truly amazing. She wrote religious biographies:

The Life of St. Patrick, Apostle of Ireland, 1869. The Life of Father Mathew the People's Soggarth Aroon, 1874. In Memoriam: Mary O'Hagan, Abbess and Foundress of the Convent of the Poor Clares, Kenmare, 1877. The Lives of St. Columba and St. Brigid, 1877. The Life and Times of Pope Pius IX, 1878. The Life of the Most Rev Joseph Dixon DD, Primate of all Ireland, 1878. Saint Francis of Assisi, no date. Life of Saint Clare, no date. Life of Saint Colette, no date. Life of Saint Gertrude, no date. The Trias Thaumaturga or Three Wonder-working Saints of Ireland, St. Patrick, St. Briget, and St. Columba, no date.

The poverty she witnessed inspired her to learn more of the story of the Irish people so she did research and wrote histories:

An Illustrated History of Ireland from the Earliest Period, 1868. The Student's Manual of Irish History, 1870. A History of the Kingdom of Kerry, 1871. The Liberator (Daniel O'Connell): His Life and Times, Political, Social, and Religious, 1872. A History of the City and County of Cork, 1875. A History of the Irish Nation, Social, Ecclesiastical, Biographical, Industrial, and Antiquarian, 1878.

Social conditions in Ireland and especially in Kenmare inspired her to write: *Advice to Irish girls in America, 1872; Woman's work in Modern Society, 1874; The Case of Ireland Stated : a Plea for my People and my Race, 1881*. She composed music for Tennyson's *St. Agnes' Eve* and for the Reverend J. Ryan's *The Morning Sacrifice*. This is by no means a complete list of Sister Francis Clare's work. Because of the strict Enclosure observed by the Sisters it was necessary to facilitate her writing career by having material sent to the Convent from libraries and archives in Ireland and she was helped by a secretary, Janice Downing.

Her books were very popular among Irish exiles in England, America and the Continent. When Ireland was again struck by Famine in 1879-1880 she wrote to newspapers at home and abroad begging for help and she collected almost £20,000 for the relief of distress. Sister Francis Clare recognised the power of the communications media to expose and redress suffering and injustice. With great foresight she wrote "*the Press is now what the Pulpit was in past ages, and the sooner we realise and act on this fact the better. We must meet the propaganda of evil with the propaganda of good.*" Margaret Cusack left Kenmare in 1881 and for a while she settled in Knock. Her prolific work during twenty years in Saint Clare's Convent earned her the title by which we remember her: The Nun of Kenmare.

We remember the Sisters who lived by the ideals of Saint Clare and who served generations of Kenmare children and who are buried in Saint Clare's cemetery:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Year of death</i>	<i>Number of years professed</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Mother Michael O'Hagan, Belfast	1825-1876		founding Sister
Sister Bonaventure Mc Loughlin	1868	16	founding Sister
Sister Aloysius Collins, returned to Newry when Kenmare was established			founding Sister
Sister Teresa Lowry, Newry.	1891		founding Sister
Sister Michael Denvir, returned to Newry when Kenmare was established			founding Sister
Sister Francis Clare Cusack, Dublin, left for Knock 1881.			founding Sister
Sister Catherine Dugdale, Lancashire.	1924	63	founding Sister
Sister Agnes Barrett, Dublin	1927	64	ex Presentation Sister
Sister Joseph McCarthy, Kenmare	1929	65	
Sister Gertrude Courtenay, Kenmare.	1938	74	
Sister Bonaventure Smith, Lancashire	1939		
Sister Agatha Tuomey, Millstreet	1915	47	
Sister Stanislaus Moloney, Kenmare	1926	58	
Sister John Adye – Curran, Dublin	1884	16	
Sister Angela Trappes, Manchester	1927	59	

Sister Raphael Clare O'Callaghan, Killarney	1919	53	
Sister Elizabeth Dugdale, Lancashire			widowed, mother of:
Sister Catherine Dugdale,	1894	26	
Sister Josephine O'Sullivan Beare, Cobh	1898	27	
Sister Anthony Murphy, Kenmare	1871	8 days	
Sister Fidelis Mc Arevey, Newry.	1934	63	
Sister Evangelista Mc Arevey, Newry	1911	37	
Sister Francis Fitzgerald, Dungarvan	1932	58	
Sister Clare Giusanni, Cork	1893	19	
Sister Joseph O'Sullivan, Tuosist	1906	33	
Sister Cecilia O'Hear, Lanarkshire	1930	55	
Sister Teresa Joseph Courtenay, Kenmare	1913	34	
Sister Louis Lynch, Killarney	1947	64	
Sister Assisi Woods, Keady	1944	61	
Sister Teresa Joseph Hennessey, Cork	1925	36	
Sister Bernardine Lynch, Killarney	1919	33	
Sister Francesca Quinlan, Ballydesmond	1924	38	
Sister Patrick Denvir	1913	46	
Sister Francis De Sales Daly, Dromahoe	1965	69	
Sister Columba Twomey, Castleisland	1924	23	
Sister Anthony Twomey, Castleisland.	1921	18	
Sister Alphonsus Mac Loughlin, Castlegregory	1952		
Sister Clare Mac Loughlin, Castlegregory	1935	19	
Sister Gerard O'Shea, Kenmare	1954	22	
Sister Brendan Morrissey, Foynes	1981	52	
Sister Philomena McCarthy, Kenmare	2008	69	
Sister Cecilia Twomey, Kilgarvan.	1998	54	
Sister Brigid Roche, Cork	1980	49	
Sister Roisin O'Doherty, Donegal	1986	36	
Sister Kathleen Griffin, Caherciveen	1990	40	
Sister Anne O'Shea, Killarney	2006	50	

There are two secular ladies buried with the Sisters :

Brigid Wylde, died 1871 aged 22 years and Julia O'Sullivan, died 1934 aged 84.

In her book *Poor Clare Convent Kenmare* Sister Philomena writes (p.87) of the rules and ideals of Poor Clare Education, "It is not the rich and great ones of this world who will be the object of their toil and care but preferably the poor and humble ones of Jesus Christ; their reward will not be the riches of this world but the treasures of Heaven.....They should remember that according to the promise of

God Himself, 'those who instruct others in the ways of Justice shall shine like stars in the firmament for all eternity.'" (Daniel, 12:3).

May they rest in peace those Sisters who followed the ideals of Saint Clare for 150 years in the Kenmare Cloister and who have now gone to God. May their successors walk with courage in their footsteps and may we all remember those 'stars in the firmament.'

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