

The Foundation of the Monastery of St Alphonsus – Dublin

The Redemptoristines, the Sisters of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer, are the hidden members of the Redemptorist family. They are in fact the 'older sisters' of the Redemptorist men, since their community was born in Italy on Pentecost Sunday, 1731 a year earlier than that of their brethren. Redemptorists and Redemptoristines are bound by a common story of origin and by a distinctive spirituality. When Alphonsus Maria de Liguori went to the hill town of Scala overlooking Amalfi to recover his shattered health, he found a community of sisters living in the old monastery according to the Rule of the Visitation but with no canonical links to that Order. This community was under the direction of Alphonsus' spiritual guide Thomas Falcoia, Bishop of Castellamare. One of the members of the community, Sr Maria Celeste Crostarosa, who had born in the city of Naples in the same year as Alphonsus (1696), had been experiencing extraordinary mystical graces in prayer for some years. She had a growing conviction that God was calling her to reform the convent at Scala on the basis of a new Rule she felt was being revealed to her. The distinctive feature of Celeste's Rule was its stress on a contemplative spirituality that the community and each sister in it was to become a 'living memory' of the Father's love revealed to humanity in the mystery of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The first monastery north of the Alps was founded in Vienna in 1830. Within twenty-five years, six convents had branched out from Vienna in Austria to Belgium and Holland. The monastery in Bruges had only been founded in 1841, but in the eighteen years of its existence, it in turn had founded several daughter houses and the novitiate showed no signs of emptying. The entrance books for choir and lay sisters record the names of seven Irish women who entered the community between 1855 and 1859.¹ The first of these was Alice Mary Devitt of Limerick who entered on 28 October 1855 at the age of 20. She received the habit and the religious name of Mary Serpahim of the Most Blessed Sacrament in January 1857. She was professed a year later (25 January 1858), some

¹ The last Irish woman to enter the Bruges community was Margaret Donovan who arrived in 1901 but left after a few months.

months before Mother Philomène received word of the vacant convent in Drumcondra.² Alice Devitt had arrived in Bruges accompanied by her sister and father. Her sister was bound for the Convent of Notre Dame de Namur in southern Belgium. This community had close associations with Fr Louis de Buggenoms, so it was probably he who was instrumental in turning the thoughts of the two sisters towards convents in far away Belgium.³ Mary Malone of Limerick entered on 7 January 1856 at the age of 32, receiving the names of Mary Magdalene of Jesus.⁴ Mary Louise Howley of Rich Hill, Lisnagry, near Limerick entered at the age of 21 to become known for the future as Sr. Mary Gertrude of the Incarnation. She was professed 30 July 1859, and one month later, she departed to become a member of the new community in Dublin. Two more candidates arrived in June 1858, one as a choir nun and the other a lay sister. They were Henrietta Hart of Dublin and Brigid Kilmartin of Limerick respectively. Miss Hart left before receiving the habit. Bridget Kilmartin probably received the habit and her new names of Sr Aloysia of Divine Providence in some haste on 28 February 1859, for the on the day following the ceremony, she left for Dublin with the pioneering group. Another lay postulant, Sophie Temple of Dundalk entered on 10 April 1859, receiving the names of Aloysius of Jesus and Mary. She was professed 1863 and remained in Bruges where she died in 1868. Three weeks later, Catherine Prositer of Tintern (Co Kilkenny) arrived as a choir postulant, but left the following January without receiving the habit.⁵ It has not proved possible to fill in the details of the story of these women's vocations, especially what became of the two who left, but a number of things seem evident. The majority (four) were from the Limerick area: the remaining three were from places where Redemptorists had preached missions. The driving force behind this recruiting campaign

² She was a grandniece of Daniel O'Connell who won for Ireland Catholic Emancipation under the rule of the English Government. According to her mortuary card, Sr Seraphina of the Blessed Sacrament was 'the first Irish Redemptoristine'. She died in Drumcondra in 1905 at the age of 70, 'in the forty-seventh year of her profession'.

³ Louis de Buggenoms had persuaded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to take charge of a girls' school at Penrhyn near Falmouth where he was superior of the first Redemptorist community founded 1843., cf. Sharp, *Reapers of the Harvest*, 8.

⁴ Redemptoristines were traditionally given a religious name on receiving the habit: choir sisters added the name Mary as the first name e.g. Sr. Mary Serpahine to distinguish them from lay-sisters. Each sister was then allowed to chose her 'predicat' in keeping with her special devotion e.g. 'of the Blessed Sacrament', 'of Divine Providence' etc.

⁵ Annals of the Brugge Monastery, Belgium.

for the Redemptoristines was Fr. Louis de Buggenoms.⁶ Apart from the two lay sister candidates, the women seem to have belonged to the Catholic gentrified upper-middle classes. The demands for entry into a contemplative Order were fairly exacting. A young lady was required to have a fairly high standard of education (including sufficient knowledge of Latin to recite the Divine Office). She also had to have a dowry sufficient to support her from the interest for the rest of her life.

In August 1858, Rev. Mother Marie-Philomène, Prioress of the Redemptoristine Monastery in Bruges in Belgium, received a letter from a friend in far off Dublin. Her correspondent, a Miss Murphy, informed her that the Sisters of the Order of Charity, who had been conducting a Magdalene Asylum in Drumcondra, had recently left their premises for new home at High Park, Upper Drumcondra.⁷ A Dublin priest, Fr James Smith, had founded the Drumcondra house. According to the terms of his will, if it were no longer required for the purposes of the asylum, it was to be offered to another community of sisters.

Mother Philomène wasted little time. She contacted Fr. Louis de Buggenoms C.Ss.R. then at Bishop Eton, Liverpool who hurried over to assess the property's potential as a possible home for a contemplative community. His first impressions must have been positive, for he returned a month later accompanied by Mother Philomène and another sister from Bruges, the thirty-five year old Marie-Jeanne de la Croix. The sisters probably took a more critical look than Fr Louis, for judging from their account, the house was in a poor state of repair. Nor was the question of the ownership of the property quite as simple as it had initially appeared. The final decision about the future use of the house rested with the Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen. Despite these obstacles, the sisters decided to make a foundation in Dublin if the ecclesiastical authorities were agreeable. A formal request was made in their name by Bishop Malou of Bruges, their ordinary superior. Dr Cullen was then in Rome, but signified his assent in a letter dated 4 February 1859. The sisters arrived in Ireland on the 3 March 1859.

⁶ Annals, Monastery of St Alphonsus, Dublin. Pp 1-2 (1859).

⁷ The suburb of Drumcondra is situated in north Dublin and was at the time of the foundation an agricultural designation.

To their dismay, they found that little by way of renovation had been done to the house in the meantime. The builders seemed puzzled by what precisely 'an enclosed convent' entailed, for there was no door connecting the sisters' quarters with the outside part of the convent! This is not particularly surprising. Although there had been Dominican, Carmelite, and Poor Clare nuns in Dublin since the eighteenth century, none of them had been able to implement the strictly monastic style of life demanded by their Rule. All of these communities ran schools or orphanages and were virtually indistinguishable from the newer communities of Presentation and Mercy Sisters.

The Superior, Mother Jeanne de la Croix took matters energetically in hand, giving orders to knock down walls and to build doors where needed. On the 9th March, 1859 the sisters moved into the still-incomplete convent. The first days were rough. The only habitable room served as refectory, kitchen, chapel and sleeping-quarters, and the sisters slept on the ground with mounds of straw instead of pillows. They attended Mass in the Jesuit Church in Gardiner Street. Gifts for the future monastery began to trickle in, and cheered the hearts of the sisters as they stepped around ladders and over piles of building rubble. On the 23 March, Fr De Buggenoms celebrated the first Mass in the new house.

The following day, the remaining Sisters arrived from Bruges, accompanied by Fr de Held, Mere Philomène, Sr Marie-Claire and Miss Augusta Lacy, who was brought over to translate the prayers and to act as a temporary organist until Sr M. Gertrude Howley had completed her novitiate. She was later to become superior of St Alphonsus Monastery and to found in turn the monastery of Clapham in London in 1897. In 1896 the community numbered 38 sisters. The time was ripe for a foundation to England. Mother Mary Gertrude Howley, Sister Mary Liguori, Sister Mary Cecelia, Sister Mary Philomena, Sister Mary Clare, Sister Ligouri and two postulants set up home in Clapham London; some years afterwards the Monastery was transferred to Chudleigh, Devon and from there to Liverpool.⁸

⁸ *Viva Memoria*, Histories of the Monasteries of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer. 1999.

The Beginnings of Community Life

The sisters put on their red and blue Redemptoristine habits for the first time in the new monastery on the 25 March, 1859 the Feast of the Annunciation. In the afternoon, the ceremony of installation took place. Fr de Buggenoms preached a sermon on the contemplative life to the sisters and to a select gathering on the text: 'But he said, 'Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it'. Afterwards, the ladies in attendance visited the interior of the monastery, but the chronicler's account notes, 'since it was Lent, wine and fruit only could be offered' them.

On 30 March, the monastery was solemnly enclosed, and the sisters' religious life began in earnest with the public recitation of the Divine Office. Fr de Buggenoms launched them on their way by preaching the first community retreat, which began on the evening of the enclosure ceremony.

The early days of the community were dogged by poverty. Although their needs were simple, the accounts did not always balance out, and caused the young superior some anxious moments. On one occasion, Jeanne de la Croix took the drastic step of putting a bill for £11 under St Joseph's statue. The following day, the exact amount needed arrived in the form of two donations. On Pentecost Monday, she asked the sisters to pray for a sign that the foundation was under the protection of God's will: that same evening, Archbishop Cullen arrived to make his first unannounced visit, and left a gift of £50.

After spending several years in the house in Drumcondra which could only be at best a temporary solution since it quickly proved too small for the needs of the growing community. Consequently, a contract was finally signed in 1871 to build a new monastery on the site of the formerly destined Newman's abortive Catholic University of St Patrick.⁹ George Ashlin, one of the most distinguished church architects in the country was engaged to plan the new monastery. On Thursday, 18 July 1872, the stone that had been blessed for the Catholic University by 24 bishops was laid as the foundation of the

⁹ Charles O' Rourke, *St Patrick's University, Drumcondra*, UCD News (June 1983).

new monastery. Archbishop Cullen took a keen personal interest in the new proposed monastery and advised, for example, ‘that fire-places are very necessary in this climate and that there are a scarcity of them in your plan’.¹⁰

The professors of Clonliffe proved dependable chaplains for more than a century. One of them, the young Fr Joseph Marmion received the vows of a novice, Sr Mary Clare, on her deathbed.¹¹ Marmion described the experience in a letter to a Nun friend and ascribed the relief he obtained from a troublesome scruple about some of the details of his ordination to the sister's prayers. From the moment of her death, he was at peace and never again worried about the matter.¹² Soon after, he decided that the time had come to pursue his own vocation to the contemplative life. He entered the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous in Belgium, eventually becoming its Abbot. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in the Great Jubilee Year 2000 as Blessed Columba Marmion. During the years of World War I when Dom Columba brought the young members of his community to a temporary home in Co. Wexford, he resumed warm relations with the sisters of Drumcondra.

On the 2 May, 2000 the community of 15 sisters moved into the current Monastery to facilitate a more adequate ambience for the sisters liturgical life and the needs of a largely aging and infirm community. There was a steady decline in numbers in the first five years when many sisters went home to God whom they had served and loved so well, bringing the community down to 8. In September 2005 the first postulant joined the new monastery and the community has been blessed with an upsurge in new vocations since. The Monastery therefore remains in the heart of Dublin and plays a pivotal role in the local community.

Our mission within the Redemptorist family is not to go out and preach the word as our Redemptorist Fathers, Brothers and co-workers do, but the fruit of our sacrifices and

¹⁰ Letter dated 1 Feb 1872, *Annals of the Monastery of St Alphonsus*.

¹¹ Sr Mary Clare R.I.P. - 17 Aug 1884.

Fr. Joseph Marmion, later to become Blessed Columba Marmion was appointed Chaplain to the Monastery of St Alphonsus from the 1 September 1882 – October 1886. *Annals of the Monastery of St Alphonsus, Dublin*.

¹² Mark Tierney OSB’ *Blessed Columba Marmion*, (The Columba Press, 2000), p 28.

prayer in Christ our Redeemer, bring strength and healing not only to our local community but also reach to the ends of the earth. People call, write and communicate their anxieties and troubles to us daily especially through e-mail. The newly installed web camera in our Chapel enables many thousands of people to join with us in prayer to God. Our small retreat facility and faith formation center are at the service of those who can avail of it. We have associate members of our community who share our charism and live it in their active daily lives. We in turn share in their lives of prayer.

People are welcome to join us daily for the celebration of the Eucharist, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, parts of the Divine Office and other services. Together we form one community in our parish and feel supported and deeply enriched by our people's presence.

We support ourselves by producing altar breads for churches, the writing of icons, candle-making and other religious art. We celebrate the Divine Office in choir, spend three half-hour periods each day in contemplative prayer as well as *lectio divina* and study.

Chapter Four

Redemptorist Women in Dublin

Many people who are familiar with the work of Redemptorists and even regularly frequent their churches are often surprised to learn that the Redemptorist family tree includes several women's branches. Most were founded with the encouragement of Redemptorists who acted as spiritual guides to the women founders and shared with them the traditional resources of Alphonsian and Redemptorist spirituality, often passing on a modified form of the Redemptorist Rule or the rhythm of the daily exercises of prayer. It is difficult to say precisely how many congregations of sisters have a specifically Redemptorist association: the entries for ten women's congregations in *Dictionary of Redemptorists* is incomplete.¹³ The Irish Holy Faith Sisters, for instance, while having no specific Redemptorist links, received from their founder Margaret Aylward a strong Alphonsian element in their spirituality and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were introduced to England by the Redemptorist Louis de Buggenoms already encountered in

¹³ S.J. Boland *Dictionary of Redemptorists*, Rome (1987).

the earlier chapters.¹⁴ Congregations with a closer connection to the Redemptorists include the following. The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were founded in the United States in 1845 with the encouragement of the then Redemptorist Fr Florent Gillet (1813-1892). The Oblatas del Santisimo Redentor were founded in Madrid in 1870 and have houses in Central and Latin America as well as in Spain. The Missionary Sisters of the Most Holy Redeemer are an international missionary group, founded near Munich in 1957 and better known as the Gars Sisters. Historically the women's community most closely associated with the Redemptorists is the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer. This chapter will begin with a brief history of the Order before going on to sketch the story of their foundation in Dublin.

Ladies in Red

The Redemptoristines, the Sisters of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer, are, in fact, the 'older sisters' of the Redemptorist men. Their community was born on Pentecost Sunday, 1731, more than a year before that of their brethren. Redemptorists and Redemptoristines are bound by a common story of origins and spirituality. When Alphonsus Maria de Liguori went to the hill town of Scala overlooking Amalfi in 1730 to recover his shattered health, he found a community of sisters living in an old monastery according to the Visitation rule but with no canonical links to that order.¹⁵ It is likely that Alphonsus' choice of a holiday location was due to his spiritual director, Thomas Falcoia, Bishop of Castellamare di Stabia near Naples, who was also director of the community. The community was at that time in something of a ferment and Falcoia may have been hoping to draw on Alphonsus' advice. One of members of the community, Sr Maria Celeste Crostarosa, like Alphonsus a native of Naples and born in the same year, 1696, had been having mystical experiences for some years. God, she claimed, was calling her to reform the convent at Scala and was providing it with a new rule that was being revealed to her. The distinctive feature of this rule was its stress on a contemplative spirituality that the community, and each sister in it, was called to become a 'living memorial' of the God the Father's love as revealed in the mystery of the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Both Maria Celeste Crostarosa and Alphonsus Liguori were at turning points in their lives at this time. Liguori had considered abandoning his priestly career in Naples in order to dedicate himself full-time to preaching missions in country districts. The encounter with spiritual poverty of the shepherds on the hills around Scala during his holiday convinced him that it was there rather than in Naples that God wanted him. At Falcoia's insistence, he investigated Maria Celeste Crostarosa's visionary experiences,

¹⁴ He had persuaded them to take charge of a girls' school at Penrhyn near Falmouth where he was superior of the first Redemptorist community founded 1843, cf. Sharp, *Reapers*, 8.

¹⁵ In addition to the biographies of Alphonsus already mentioned, the fullest sources for the history of Redemptoristine origins are D. Capone and S. Majorano, *I Redentoristi e le Redentoriste: Le Radici*. Materdomini: Valsele (1985) and S. Majorano, *L'Imitazione per la Memoria del Salvatore. Il Messaggio Spirituale di Suor Maria Celeste Crostarosa 1696-1755* (Bibliotheca Historica CSSR VII). Rome: EDCALF (1978). For the later history, see Clement Heinze *Die Redemptoristinnen*, Bonn: Hofbauer Verlag (1931).

decided she was a reliable witness and encouraged both bishop and sisters to act on them. On Pentecost Sunday 1731, the sisters adopted a distinctive red and blue habit and undertook to live according to the vision of the still incomplete 'Rule of the Most Holy Saviour'. Crostarosa's visions included a congregation of missionaries, imitating the active life of Christ the Saviour, who would be the male counterpart of the women's contemplative community. On 9 November 1732, Alphonsus Liguori assembled a group of priests and layman who were prepared to share his vision. They made their first home in the guesthouse of the convent, following the same rhythm of prayer and contemplation as the sisters. Alphonsus did not accept all of Crostarosa's recommendations. He had more experience of active ministry than she had and drew a very firm line under the suggestion that they adopt the same red and blue habit as the sisters.

Within a few months, the two communities were experiencing difficulties. Bishop Falcoia proved a controlling director who wanted all matters relating to the two new religious groups to pass through his hands. Although Alphonsus was inclined to defer to the bishop's judgement, Crostarosa put up a more spirited resistance. Matters were not helped when some members of the men's community began to interfere in the affairs of the convent by undertaking the spiritual direction of individual sisters. Marie Celeste Crostarosa grew increasingly isolated within the community that she had founded. When she refused to submit unquestioningly to Falcoia's direction, she was expelled from the convent at Scala. Given shelter by a number of different convents, she lived an itinerant life until she succeeded in founding another house according to her rule at Foggia in 1738. She died there in 1755.

Given the stormy history of the Scala community and the departure of the men's community in 1737, relations between the two branches of the Redemptorist family were not especially close. Alphonsus included a prohibition of taking on the direction of convents of women in his rule but some early Redemptorists, including Gerard Majella continued to be close friends of Crostarosa. Official contacts between the two communities were few. When Alphonsus became bishop of the diocese of S. Agata dei Goti the Province of Benevento near Naples, he invited the sisters of Scala to make a foundation in his cathedral city (1766). There were now three communities following Crostarosa's rule, but her last troubled days in Scala drove a breach between them and her final home at Foggia remained isolated from the other two. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Redemptoristine communities seemed destined to meet the same fate as other small communities that had risen in the relative isolation of the small towns and villages of rural Italy, flourishing for a generation or two and then passing quietly into oblivion.

A New Beginning in Vienna

Like the Redemptorists, the Redemptoristines were saved from such a fate by the energy of Clement Hofbauer, the vicar general for the northern European houses and his successors. He had little knowledge of the sisters' communities beyond what he had read in the life of Alphonsus, so it is all the more surprising to find him informing Pietro Blassucci the superior general in 1808 that he had applied for the royal assent to found a community of Redemptoristines in Warsaw.¹⁶ Clement's intention was that this

¹⁶ Heinze *Die Redemptoristinnen*, 93.

community of sisters would undertake the education of girls as counterpart of his own educational work for boys. Nothing came of the plan, as Clement had to flee the city later the same year before the advance of Napoleon.

It was left to Joseph Passerat, Clement's successor as vicar of the transalpine houses, to bring his plan to fulfillment. In 1822, Passerat gathered a group of women to run a shelter for homeless women in Vienna.¹⁷ In time they would become the nucleus of the first Redemptoristine community outside of (*Ital.*) but for the next ten years they carried on running the hostel with their transformation into a contemplative Redemptoristine community seeming ever more remote. Passerat eventually acceded to their pleas to be permitted to establish a community entirely devoted to the contemplative life. With the agreement of the superior general, two of the longest serving members of the community, Eugenie Dijon and the Countess Antonia von Welsersheimb, set off in 1830 for the monastery of S. Agata dei Goti to gain first-hand experience of the Redemptoristine way of life.¹⁸

Eugénie Gauvenet Dijon was born in Brittany in 1793. Her family were forced to flee revolutionary France on account of their royalist sympathies. Brought up in Vienna, Eugénie came under the influence of the Redemptorists and was one of the first members of the group running the women's refuge. Antonia Suaradi was born in Graz, Austria in 1772. After a brief marriage to Count Joseph Von Welsersheimb, she was widowed in 1811. The two women left Vienna for the monastery of S Agata in September 1830. Their journey took six weeks. Passerat had carefully prepared it through his contacts with the Redemptorist general and the Holy See. The papal secretary of state wrote no less than five letters of introduction on their behalf including one to the nuncio to Naples and to the bishop of St Agata.¹⁹ While the sisters were happy to receive them, the revolutionary threat to the Papal States which had erupted early in 1831 made it unwise to receive them formally as novices. After a stay of less than six months, they departed for home, bearing with them the habit of the order and a copy of the rule. During a brief halt in Rome, the Roman procurator of the Redemptorists who attended to the congregation's business with the Holy See arranged for Cardinal Carlo Odescalchi (1786-1841), prefect of the congregation for bishops and regulars to clothe them with the habit on Easter Saturday 1831. He also arranged an audience by Pope Gregory XVI (1765-1846).²⁰

Back in Vienna, they began the task of initiating the women they had left behind into the first Redemptoristine community outside of Italy. This might be said to mark the 're-founding' of the Redemptoristines. Like all attempts at re-founding, the past was not the sole arbiter of how the future might be constructed. Eugenie Dijon, now Sr Mary Alphonsus of the Will of God and Antonia von Welsersheimb, now Marianne Joseph of the Resurrection, had brought back a copy of the Redemptoristine rule with them which they set about translating it into French and German. They interpreted as best they could in the light of the daily routine they had lived during the months in S Agata, but their brief stay had scarcely allowed them to assimilate the history and traditions of the order

¹⁷ Henri Girouille (ET John Carr) *Life of the Venerable Father Joseph Passerat*. 353.

¹⁸ Andreas Sampers, 'L'ingresso di Eugenia Dijon e Antonia von Welsersheimb nel monastero delle Redemptoristines di S. Agata dei Goti, 18 November 1830', in *SHCSSR* vol XX/ I (1972) 15-23.

¹⁹ Heinze, *Redemptoristinnen* 101.

²⁰ Heinze, *Redemptoristinnen* 104-105

with any depth. For the rest, they depended on their own good sense and on the guidance of Passerat to give the essentials of the Redemptoristine rule a new expression in the situation of Northern Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century.

In the years that followed, the Redemptoristines spread almost as rapidly as the male branch. Encouraged by the Redemptorists, they had established themselves in Bruges by 1841. Other convents followed in quick succession in Austria (Reid 1852), Germany (Gars 1854), Holland (Marienthal 1851), and Belgium (Malines 1855). Although Redemptorists and Redemptoristines share a historical and spiritual patrimony, they were never a single religious family as each monastery of the sisters (*is autonomous and of Pontifical right*) Rome grants *SOME* authority to the local ordinary independent and under the control of the bishop of the diocese. There are important canonical distinctions between the two. The sisters are the *Order* of the Most Holy Redeemer, with solemn vows and strict enclosure, as opposed to the men's Congregation of simple vows. Each monastery of the Order is independent, directly subject to the Bishop of the Diocese. During their brief stay in Rome, Sisters Antonia and Eugenie obtained permission for the future monastery to be placed directly under the authority of the Redemptorists. Given his own attraction towards the interior life, it was inevitable that Joseph Passerat as vicar general would recognise the complementary vocation of the male and female branches of the Redemptorist family. He undertook the direction of the first community of women in Vienna, just as he was later to encourage his disciples in Belgium to take an active role in nurturing the community of Bruges. However, Rudolph Von Smetana, Passerat's successor as vicar general, looked less favourably on this growing relationship between the two branches of the Redemptorist family, and strictly applied the letter of the rule which forbade Redemptorists to undertake the direction of women's communities. By the end of the nineteenth century, about twenty Redemptoristine convents had been established. The three original Italian houses fared less well. They were seriously affected by the movement for Italian unification, particularly its constraints on the property of religious communities and the independent status of each monastery left them to fend for themselves with poor results. By the early twentieth century, they were reduced to a handful of aging sisters living in crumbling monasteries. Their survival is due to the efforts of the Redemptorist, William Van Rossum (1854-1932). As a member of the Redemptorist general council, he had saved the derelict monastery of Scala by arranging its formal purchase from the state by the German Redemptorists. More importantly, he arranged for some Belgian sisters to come in an effort to revive the religious life of what was by then just a few sick and elderly sisters, living in poverty and near-squalor.²¹ Van Rossum's experience in Scala made him realise that there was little future in individual communities maintaining independent status and that some form of federation was required. When he was made Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in charge of foreign missions, he also arranged to have himself nominated as 'Cardinal Protector' of the Redemptoristine Order.²² This was an ancient and largely ceremonial honour which he used to good effect to work for greater unity among the sisters. He proposed that the monasteries consider a form of federation was not sadly not well

²¹ Heinze, *Redemptoristinnen* 192-198

²² On Van Rossum's career, see Joop Vernooij "Cardinal Willem van Rossum, C.S.S.R.: 'The great Cardinal of the small Netherlands' (1854-1932)" *SPHCSSR*, vol. 55, n°2, (2007), 347-400

received. Had it been, it might have had a different effect on the shape of the Order in later years.

Foundation of the Monastery of St Alphonsus, Dublin

In August 1858, Reverend Mother Marie-Philomène, prioress of the Redemptoristine monastery in Bruges, Belgium, received a letter from Dublin. Her correspondent, a Miss Murphy, informed her that the Sisters of the Order of Charity, who had been conducting a Magdalene asylum in Drumcondra, had recently left their premises for a new home at High Park, Upper Drumcondra. According to the terms of the will of the Dublin priest, Fr James Smith, who had founded the house, if it were no longer required for the purposes of the asylum, it was to be offered to another community of sisters.

Mother Philomène wrote to Redemptorist Fr Louis de Buggenoms, who had moved to Bishop Eton, Liverpool from Limerick the previous year. He travelled to Dublin to assess the property's potential as a home for a contemplative community. His first impressions must have been positive, for he returned a month later accompanied by Mother Philomène, and another sister from Bruges, the thirty-five year-old Marie-Jeanne de la Croix. The sisters took a more critical look than de Buggenoms did and considered it to be in a poor state of repair. Nor was the question of the ownership of the property as simple as it had initially appeared. The final decision about the future use of the house rested with the archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen. Despite these obstacles, the sisters decided to make a foundation in Dublin if the ecclesiastical authorities were agreeable. Bishop Malou of Bruges made a formal request in their name to Cullen. Cullen, who was in Rome, signified his assent in a letter dated 4 February 1859.

This account, from the chronicles of the Redemptoristine monasteries of Bruges and Dublin, gives the impression that the sisters founded their Dublin home in a somewhat haphazard fashion. There are indications, however, that the idea of founding a community of Redemptoristines in Ireland had been maturing for some years. As will be clear from the historical outline in the previous section, Bruges was a relatively young foundation (1841), but a vibrant one. In the first eighteen years of its life, it had founded several daughter houses. The entrance books for choir and lay sisters record the names of seven Irish women who entered the community between 1855 and 1859. The first of these was Alice Mary Devitt of Limerick, a grandniece of Daniel O'Connell, who entered in October 1855 at the age of twenty, receiving the religious name of Mary Seraphina of the Most Blessed Sacrament.²³ Alice Devitt had arrived in Bruges accompanied by her father and sister who was bound for the Convent of Notre Dame in Namur in southern Belgium. This community had close associations with Fr Louis de Buggenoms, so it was likely that he was instrumental in turning the thoughts of the two sisters towards convents in faraway Belgium.²⁴

In the late 1850s, a small but steady stream of Irish aspirants to the

²³ According to her mortuary card, Sr Seraphina of the Blessed Sacrament was 'the first Irish Redemptoristine'. She died in Drumcondra in 1905 at the age of 70, 'in the forty-seventh year of her profession'.

²⁴ Louis de Buggenoms had persuaded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to take charge of a girls' school at Penrhyn near Falmouth where he was superior of the first Redemptorist community founded 1843, cf. Sharp, *Reapers*, 8.

Redemptoristines made the journey to Belgium. Mary Malone of Limerick entered in January 1856 at the age of thirty-two, receiving the names of Mary Magdalene of Jesus.²⁵ Mary Louise Howley of Rich Hill, Lisnagry, near Limerick entered at the age of twenty-one to become known for the future as Sr Mary Gertrude of the Incarnation and was professed in July 1859. Two more candidates arrived in June 1858, one as a choir nun and the other as a lay sister. They were Henrietta Hart of Dublin and Brigid Kilmartin of Limerick. Miss Hart left before receiving the habit. Bridget Kilmartin may have received the habit and her new name of Sr Aloysia of Divine Providence with a degree of haste on 28 February 1859, for she left for Dublin with the founding group on the following day. Another lay postulant, Sophie Temple of Dundalk, entered in April 1859, receiving the names of Aloysius of Jesus and Mary. She was professed in 1863 and remained in Bruges until her death in 1868. She was followed shortly afterwards by Catherine Prosser of Tintern in Co. Kilkenny who arrived as a choir postulant, but left the following January before receiving the habit.

Although the personal details on these women are sparse, some general observations might be made. Four were from the Limerick area and the remaining three from places where Redemptorists had preached missions. The driving force behind this recruiting campaign for the Redemptoristines appears to have been Fr Louis de Buggenoms. Apart from the two lay sister candidates, the women belonged to the Catholic upper-middle or small landowner classes. Requirements for entry into a contemplative order were exacting. A young lady was required to have a fairly high standard of education, including sufficient knowledge of Latin to be able recite the Divine Office. She also had to have a dowry sufficient to support her from its interest for the rest of her life. Given the expansion of the sisters in the preceding twenty years, it might appear that Fr de Buggenoms guided young women who came to him for spiritual direction towards the Redemptoristines in the hope that they might form the nucleus of the first Irish foundation of the Order.

Having obtained the consent of the Archbishop of Dublin, Mère Philomène wasted no time in naming the seven sisters chosen for the foundation. They were Sisters Jeanne de la Croix as Superior, Anne-Joseph of the Annunciation, Mechtilde of the Blessed Sacrament, Seraphina of the Blessed Sacrament, Magdalene of Jesus, Augustine of the Blessed Trinity and Aloysia of Divine Providence. Three were Irish (Seraphina, Magdalene and Aloysia), and Sr Gertrude Howley joined them after her profession. It seems hard to explain why Sophie Temple (Aloysia of Jesus and Mary) was left on in Bruges. Augustine of the Trinity was the only experienced lay sister and seems to have played the role of general home-maker of the community. Four sisters departed at once for Dublin, travelling in lay-dress from Ostend via London.

On their arrival in Dublin, they discovered that little by way of renovation had been done to the house. The builders seem to have taken literally the definition of 'an enclosed convent,' for there was no door connecting the sisters' quarters with the outside. Although there had been Dominican, Carmelite, and Poor Clare communities in Dublin since the eighteenth century, none of them had been able to implement the strictly

²⁵ Redemptoristines were traditionally given a religious name on receiving the habit: choir sisters added the name Mary as the first name, e.g. Sr. Mary Seraphine, to distinguish them from lay-sisters. Each sister was allowed to chose her *predicat* (e.g. 'of the Blessed Sacrament', 'of Divine Providence' etc) in keeping with her special devotion.

monastic style of life demanded by their rule. All these communities ran schools or orphanages and were virtually indistinguishable from the newer communities of Presentation and Mercy Sisters. On the 9 March 1859, they moved into the still-incomplete convent. The only habitable room available served as refectory, kitchen, chapel and sleeping-quarters, while the sisters slept on the ground with mounds of straw instead of pillows. They attended mass in the Jesuit church in Gardiner Street. Gifts for the future monastery began to arrive, and cheered the hearts of the sisters as they stepped around ladders and over piles of building rubble.

Two weeks later, the remaining sisters arrived from Bruges, accompanied by Fr Frederick de Held (1799-1881), an early disciple of Clement Hofbauer, and Mother Marie-Philomène, the prioress in Bruges. Travelling with them was a Miss Augusta Lacy, who translated the community prayers and acted as organist in the new Dublin foundation until Sr Gertrude Howley had completed her novitiate.

The Beginnings of Community Life

The sisters resumed wearing their red and blue Redemptoristine habits for the first time in the new monastery on the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March 1859. In the afternoon, the ceremony of installation took place, at the end of which the visitors viewed the interior of the monastery. The external celebration was relatively simple, 'since it was Lent, wine and fruit only could be offered them.'²⁶

Five days later, the monastery was solemnly enclosed, and the sisters took up the full observance of their rule with the solemn recitation of the divine office. Fr de Buggenoms preached the first community retreat, which began on the evening of the enclosure ceremony. Within a few weeks, the little community welcomed its first postulant, Anna O'Brien who brought with her 'a handsome silver chalice and cruets that her grandmother, Mrs Seagrave, had given her on the occasion of her entrance'. Despite their poverty, the sisters had a good Easter: 'an abundance of lamb, chickens, ham, pastry, sweets, cakes, wine, fruit etc. sufficient not only for the Easter day, but for the Easter week' was provided by friends and well-wishers. Although their needs were simple, the accounts did not always balance, and caused the young superior some anxious moments. On Pentecost Monday, she asked the sisters to pray for a sign that the foundation was under the protection of God's will: the same evening, the chronicler recorded, the archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen, came on his first unannounced visit, leaving a generous gift of £50.

The sisters who came on the foundation were almost as mixed in nationality as were the founding fathers and brothers of Limerick. Apart from the handful of Irish, the remainder were French- and Flemish-speaking Belgians. Although Irish choir postulants presented themselves, there were few lay sister candidates. The mother-house at Bruges provided three additional lay sisters, including the German Sister Alphonsus of the Mercy of Jesus. As the Redemptorists were too far away to provide for the regular spiritual needs of the sisters, finding confessors for such a linguistically diverse community as well as a chaplain for daily Mass and Benediction proved something of a headache. The priests of the diocesan college of Holy Cross, Clonliffe assumed the role of chaplains, a

²⁶ Unless otherwise stated, quotations in this section are taken from the Chronicle of the Monastery of St Alphonsus, Dublin.

task they were to perform faithfully until Clonliffe ceased to function as a seminary in the late 1990s.

Moving House

The sisters' first residence in Dumcondra could only be seen as a temporary solution. The enclosed part of the chapel set aside for the sisters' choir-chapel proved too small for the needs the growing community. Since there was little money available for expansion or purchase of a new site, the sisters prayed earnestly that a postulant might enter with a dowry large enough to make the hope of building a reality. In any case, the cramped site on the Drumcondra Road gave scant hope for much by way of repairs or extension. In 1867, the superior, Sr Jeanne de la Croix asked the community to make a novena to St Bridget to find a suitable place. As was her way, she joined a little spiritual bribery to her prayers by presenting a gold watch for the bazaar in aid of St Bridget's Orphanage run by Margaret Aylward (1810-1889) and her young congregation of the Holy Faith.²⁷ The contract was finally signed in 1871 for a new monastery to be built on a site originally destined for Newman's abortive Catholic university. George Ashlin (1837-1921), the distinguished church architect, was engaged to plan the new monastery.

In July 1872, the stone – blessed originally for the Catholic university by twenty-four bishops – was laid as the foundation of the new monastery. Owing to their rule of enclosure, the sisters did not attend the stone laying ceremonies. According to the chronicler, 'we had also to stop the recital aloud of Vespers, for at that very moment the procession of carriages, bands etc playing national airs passing our windows to the ceremony, the noise was too great for us to hear each other.' After their prayers, they were allowed go into the garden to listen to the music and 'we amused ourselves very much'.

Building work did not proceed smoothly. Jeanne de la Croix narrowly escaped serious injury when a plank gave way as she was inspecting progress on the building. Just as it neared completion, news came of the builder's bankruptcy. The delay was not helped by the bankrupt's claim that the sisters' failure to pay him on time was a contributory cause to his financial ruin. The first sister to enter the precincts of the new monastery was Sr Mechtild of the Blessed Sacrament. She died on 29 May, 1874 at the age of thirty-five and was buried in the place destined as the future cemetery. The fine convent at the top of St Alphonsus Road remained the sisters' home until 2000. New needs and the difficulty of adapting an aging building required the construction of a new monastery on part of the original site.

Sisters and Friends

It may be useful here to sketch in broad strokes some details of the early members of the Redemptoristine Community and their friends. The first superior or prioress was Julie Verhulst, known in religion as Sr Jeanne de la Croix. She was born in Courtrai, Belgium in 1826 and entered the monastery of Bruges at the age of nineteen. The evidence suggests that she was a woman of more than ordinary talent. She was made novice mistress at a young age and at a time when vocations were flourishing in the convent of Bruges. It had been able to supply fourteen sisters to make a foundation in Malines in 1855. Three years later, Jeanne de la Croix helped in another foundation at Velp in Holland (1858). The following year, she came to Dublin as foundress at the early age of

²⁷ On Margaret Aylward and her congregation see Jacinta Prunty *Margaret Aylward. Lady of Charity, Woman of Faith*. Dublin: Four Courts (1999).

33 and to her is due much of the early success of the venture. She proved a capable manager of the scant resources of the monastery, stretching them on occasion through the generosity of the members of her own family.

Jeanne de la Croix remained as prioress from the foundation until 1890, a period of more than thirty years. Such lengthy periods in office were not unknown in religious houses at this time but Jeanne de la Croix may have enjoyed the confidence of Cardinal Cullen and his successor, Edward McCabe (archbishop 1879-1895) who allowed her to continue as superior for so long. She left Ireland in 1894 accompanied by her faithful friend, the lay sister Aloysia of Divine Providence, another of the founding sisters. Although by then sixty-eight years of age, her destination was the monastery of St Amand les Eaux, a more recent daughter house of Bruges and the first Redemptoristine monastery in France. When the French monasteries became victims of 'laws of association' of 1901 which imposed severe restrictions on religious communities, they were forced to find new homes in Belgium and Holland. Jeanne de la Croix found herself back in Velp where she had been a pioneer before coming to Dublin. There she died there 1902. Sr Aloysia, the former Bridget Kilmartin who had entered Bruges in 1858, survived her for almost two decades, dying in Velp in 1920.

The majority of the women who entered the cloister of the monastery of St Alphonsus in Drumcondra as choir-nuns belonged to the small Catholic gentry or professional classes as they were required to have enough education to be able to pray the divine office in Latin and a sufficient dowry to enable the community to support them from its income. Women who did not enjoy such comparative privilege entered as lay sisters. The rule had ordained that there was to be a balance between choir-nuns and lay sisters, ideally, twelve of the former and six of the later. The main occupation of the choir-nuns was the chanting of the divine office in choir while the lay sisters attended to the day-to-day running of the monastery, especially the chores of kitchen and housework.

Several of the original Irish members of the community have already appeared been referred to here. The background of others is more obscure, as little has survived by way of personal records. As has been stated, the first new entrant to the Redemptoristine monastery in Drumcondra within a few weeks of its opening in 1859 was Anna O'Brien, who became Sr Mary Alphonsa in religion. She was distantly connected to William Smith O'Brien, the Young Ireland leader and niece of J. L. O'Ferrall of Granite Hall, Kingstown, who was an early benefactor of the Redemptorists and Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan police.

Sister Gertrude Howley, who joined the community after completing her novitiate in Bruges, was from Limerick. Several of the early sisters came from Waterford. Josephine Power was daughter of James Power and Eleanor de Vere of New Ross. She took the name Teresa of St Alphonsus and was professed in 1862. She died 1891. We have seen how when their first house was in need of repair the sisters turned in prayer to St Joseph to send them a postulant with enough money to see the project through. Their prayers looked as though they were being answered on the very first day of their novena (23 Sept 1868) when an unlikely figure arrived on their doorstep. Maria Pereira was a Portuguese lady who had come from London to visit the convent with the intention of becoming a nun. The sisters were delighted 'for we feel sure we can have, if Miss Pereira perseveres, the long-wished for monastery, as she is very wealthy.' Unfortunately 'being of delicate health, she was unsuited even to the mildest of religious orders' and departed

within a month. Despite the setback, Miss Pereira continued her friendship with the community until her death in 1902, and donated the money for the construction of the shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the new monastery chapel.

Other women discovered that, despite their attraction to the contemplative life, they did not have the necessary Health for it. Kate O'Brien of Co. Limerick served the sisters as *tourière* (extern receptionist) for several years before entering as a lay sister. To her great disappointment, she was obliged to leave for health reasons. On her death-bed, she asked the chaplain to ensure that her family would not try to reclaim the £100 she had brought to the community when she entered as she wished to make it a gift to God, even if it meant having a pauper's funeral. When she died (1 June 1864) the monastery provided for her burial in Glasnevin and the chronicle speaks of her with evident affection. Another unfortunate sister had, what would be described today as a nervous breakdown. After several years in the convent, she became a little odd, entertaining, what the chronicle calls 'strange ideas on the religious life'. On medical advice, she was forcibly dispensed from her vows, her dowry was returned and she was put into an asylum.

One of the strangest stories of an Irish Redemptoristine took place not in Drumcondra but in Italy. A little over a year after the foundation in Dublin, an Irishwoman turned up unexpectedly at the monastery of S. Agata in southern Italy. The entry in the monastery profession-book deserves to be read in full.

On the 15 August 1860, the noble lady Anna Maria Morphy [probably, Murphy] a native of Ireland, educated in Bordo [Bordeaux] who had lived for many years in Tuscany and made twenty-two visits to Rome, at the age of 46 years of age, having received an inspiration from God, decided to become a nun of the Most Holy Redeemer in the Monastery founded by St Alphonsus. She set out from Rome, accompanied by a small retinue, and came to Naples, where she made her way to the Redemptorist Fathers. After a few hours' stay in Naples, the Fathers sent her to St Agata, accompanied by a trustworthy person. Not finding the bishop at home, she stayed for three days in our guesthouse. On his return, Monsignor Francis Paul Lettieri examined her about her reliability, and the letters concerning her dowry. He then summoned the chapter of the community to meet in his presence at the porter's lodge. As they decided to admit her, he had her enter at once. The said lady is educated in several languages, namely French, German and others. She knows music, drawing and miniature-painting.²⁸

She was born in the city of Cork and baptised in the church of St Mary and Anne on 6 March 1814, the daughter of Stephen Murphy and Catherine Heffernon. The family appear to have left Cork as the profession book records that she was confirmed in the Convent of St Agatha in Florence in 1825. Florence was something of a Mecca in the 19th century for well-off foreigners, especially those searching for a milder climate for reasons of health. By the time of her entrance in 1860, she was already 46 years of age. She took the religious name of Maria Addolorata del Cuore e Lagrime di Cristo (Mary Addolorata of

28 From the manuscript *Entrance, Clothing and Profession of the Revv. Nuns and Lay Sisters of the Venerable Monastery of St. Mary of Constantinople* (my translation). I am grateful to Fr. Emilio Lage of the Redemptorist Historical Institute in Rome who passed this extract and others from the chronicles to me.

the Heart and Tears of Christ). By the time of her profession in October 1862, the storm clouds were gathering. The monastery chronicle records that it was conducted behind closed doors, without the ringing of bells, fireworks and festive meal for the attending clergy and guests that were customary. The Kingdom of Naples had been brought to an end the previous year by the forces of Garibaldi and the movement for Italian unification was strongly anticlerical, leaning with special severity on contemplative communities. Although the monastery of St Agata survived with the sisters eventually receiving a small state pension,²⁹ Maria Addolorata as a foreigner was more vulnerable. She made her way to Rome with at least one companion. After several temporary residences, they found a home near the old Irish College in the Via S. Agata dei Goti, which she regarded as a sign of heaven's providential care for her. Some short letters from her survive in the archives of both the Irish College and Redemptorist General Archives in Rome. The last is dated 1874. I have not been able to discover the date or circumstances of her death. From the correspondence in the Irish College archives, it appears likely that Maria Addolorata and her companion continued to live their Redemptoristine life discreetly without habit or any other outward sign, but still signing her correspondence with her religious name.

One of the most unusual women to enter the monastery of St Alphonsus was Mrs Sophia Ainsworth, known in religion as Sr Mary Anne Liguori of Jesus Crucified. A sketch of her life together with a collection of her letters was published by her brother, who had preceded her into the Church under Newman's tutelage.³⁰ She first met the Redemptoristines when she provided accommodation for the first sisters as they passed through London on their way from Bruges to Dublin. Sophia Hamner Ainsworth was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman. She had been received into the Catholic church by John Henry Newman in 1851. Her husband had extensive property and business interests in Wales and the North of England. At the time of her conversion, the family was living close to the Redemptorist community of Hanley Castle, near Great Malvern in Worcestershire. On Newman's advice, she took the Redemptorist, Fr John Baptist Lans as her spiritual director. Her husband was more interested in the traditional pursuits of the gentry than he was in religious matters, but her five children soon followed her into the church, one of whom became in time a sister of Notre Dame de Namur. Through her association with Fr Lans she learned about the Redemptoristines, and for a time, considered offering a site for a monastery on her estate at Bron Erw in north Wales. Although the idea proved impractical, Sophia Ainsworth continued her friendship with the Dublin community in whose beginnings she had played a small part. After her husband's death in 1871, Sophia asked to be received as a postulant. She was now fifty-four years of age. Jeanne de la Croix accepted her and made arrangements to ensure her continued contact with her children despite the constraints of the enclosure. The chronicle records occasionally that 'the two Misses Ainsworth have come over to see their mother'. Her business and family affairs were complex. She was obliged to interrupt her novitiate for more than eighteen months to attend to them and to one of her sons who had returned from the colonies in declining health. Jeanne de la Croix, who seemed to have had few scruples about leaving the cloister when business demanded it, went with her assistant to visit Mrs Ainsworth's Welsh estate for a week to assess its potential as a convent. The

²⁹ Heinze, *Redemptoristinnen* 194.

³⁰ Anthony John Hanmer, *Mrs. Sophia Ainsworth* (for private circulation) 1889.

visit was enough to convince her that that the community was not in a position to undertake a foundation there. Sophie Ainsworth died at the convent in Drumcondra in 1882.

Relationships between Redemptorists and Redemptoristines in the early years of the life of the Drumcondra community might be described as easy and informal. Since they had no house in Dublin, the Redemptorists stayed in the convent guest house on their visits to the capital. Although they could not enter the enclosure, the evening community recreation when they were visiting was held in the large parlour with the grill thrown open.

The professors of Clonliffe College would prove to be faithful chaplains for more than a century. The best known of them is probably Fr Joseph Marmion (1858-1923) who was chaplain from 1882 to 1886.³¹ As a young priest, he was afflicted with troublesome scruples about the validity of his ordination. Early one morning in August 1884, he was summoned to receive the emergency profession of a dying novice, Sr Mary Claire. After the young sister's death, he asked her to obtain relief from his scruples, and the prayer was answered. Shortly afterwards, he decided to follow what he believed was a call to the contemplative life, entering the Benedictine abbey of Maredsous in Belgium in 1886. He eventually becoming its abbot., winning additional fame as a prolific spiritual writer. When the Germans invaded Belgium at the outbreak of World War I, Marmion found a temporary home for the young members of his community at Edermine, Co Wexford. In Ireland, the abbot resumed his friendly relations with the Redemptoristine sisters, visiting them frequently and even, with typically Marmion good humour, leaving them the photograph of himself as a cattle-dealer that had been used to procure his passport from Belgium. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II during the Jubilee Year 2000 as Blessed Columba Marmion.

³¹ For details of Marmion's life see Mark Tierney, *Blessed Columba Marmion*. Dublin: Columba Press (2000)