



Letter From Catherine McAuley

Sister M. Elizabeth Moore
Limerick

Baggot Street
January 13th, 1839

My Dear Sister Mary Elizabeth

I received your letter yesterday and thank God that you are all safe after the storm. The accounts from Limerick were as usual exaggerated [*sic*], but we heard the Convent was safe – from some person who called. We remained in Bed all night – some in terror, others sleeping, etc. The morning presented an altered scene from what we had left at 9 o'clock. The Community Room a compleat ruin in appearance, though not much real injury – the Prints and pictures all on the ground – only two broken. The maps and blinds flying like the sales [*sic*] of a ship – the Book stand down – the cabinet removed from its place, and the chairs all upset – 16 panes broken – and such a body of air in the room that we could scarcely stand. The windows are still boarded up – it is almost impossible to get a glazier – a fine harvest for them.

The Hospital at the green¹ greatly broken – a chimney fell. Several Houses blown down – and many lives lost. Your friends and Sister Vincent's safe. The Sisters in Carlow passed the night in the choir – part of their very old roof blown down. The Beautiful Cathedral much injured. The chimneys of the new Convent in Tullamore blown down – the old one and Sisters safe. We have not heard from Cork or Charleville.

My dear Sister E., I would find it most difficult to write what you say Mr. Clarke² wishes for, the circumstances which would make it interesting could never be introduced in a public discourse. It commenced with 2, Sister Doyle and I. The plan from the beginning was such as is now in practise - & in '27 the House was opened. In a year & half we were joined – so fast that it became a matter of general wonder. Doctor Murray gave his most cordial approbation and visited frequently – all was done under his direction from the time we entered the House – which was erected for the purposes of charity.

¹The new St. Vincent's Hospital on the eastside of St. Stephen's Green had been founded by Mary Aikenhead and the Sisters of Charity in 1834 in the former mansion of the Earl of Meath. It opened for women patients in 1835, for men patients in 1836

² During the spring of 1839, John Clarke, a curate in St. John's parish – the bishop's parish in Limerick – was scheduled to preach a Charity Sermon on behalf of the poor schools there. He had apparently asked Elizabeth Moore for some information about the origin of the Sisters of Mercy. His request led Catherine McAuley to pen the brief but moving account of the first years of the congregation that is the centrepiece of this letter, all the while claiming that she could not write such a history.

Doctor Blake & Revd. Mr. Armstrong were chiefly concerned – received all the Ideas I had formed – and consulted for 2 years at least before the House was built. I am sure Doctor Blake had it constantly before him in all his communications with Heaven – for I never can forget his fervent prayers – when it was in progress.

Seeing us increase so rapidly, and all going on in the greatest order almost of itself – great anxiety was expressed to give it stability. We who began were prepared to do whatever was recommended – and in September 1830 we went with Dear Sister Harley³ to Georges Hill – to serve a noviciate for the purpose of firmly establishing it. In December '31 we returned – and the progress has gone on as you know. We now have gone beyond 100 in number – and the desire to join seems rather to encrease. Though it was thought the foundations would retard it – it seems to be quite otherwise.

There has been a most marked Providential Guidance which the want of prudence – vigilance – or judgement has not impeded – and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God. I could mark circumstances calculated to defeat it at once – but nothing however injurious in itself has done any injury.

This is all I could say. The loss of property has been supplied. The Death of the most valuable Sisters passed away as of no consequence. The alarm that was spread by such repeated deaths – did not prevent others crowding in. In short, it evidently was to go on – and surmount all obstacles – many of which were great indeed – proceeding from causes within & without. One thing is remarkable – that no breach of charity every occurred amongst us. The sun never, I believe, went down on our anger. This is our only boast – otherwise we have been deficient enough – and far, very far, from cooperating generously with God in our regard, but we will try to do better – all of us – *the black heads*⁴ – will try to repair the past.

This is a repetition of what you already know. To prepare a detail fit to give Mr. Clarke would be to me now a difficult task – I should write it 10 times at least before it would be fit for his purpose – and as my sight is getting worse and my fingers stiff, I would consider it a hopeless attempt. This is the worst scribble I ever wrote – in this way I cannot hope to improve.

Write soon – it is a great comfort to me to hear from you often. Do not get tired – half your paper not written on – a little nonsense even will be acceptable.

Two Sisters to enter next week⁵. We are too full at present and going to divide the old school room to get more accom[m]odation.

Doctor Blake is to perform the ceremonies here on the 21[st] – as our Bishop does not go out early since his last severe illness. Mr Lynch⁶ is to Preach. I had a most kind affectionate letter from Doctor Blake – he tells me of your having written to him.

³ Mary Elizabeth (Elizabeth) Harley, a friend of Frances Warde, had joined the Baggot Street community on November 30, 1829. She went to George's Hill with Catherine McAuley and Anna Maria Doyle, and on December 12, 1831 professed her vows as one of the first three Sisters of Mercy. Four and a half months later (April 25, 1832), she was dead, victim of a consumptive condition that had worsened while she was at George's Hill. All the contemporary biographical manuscripts about Catherine McAuley speak fondly of Elizabeth Harley, and of Catherine's confidence in what she contributed, and might in the future have contributed, to the young congregation.

⁴ That is, the professed sisters, who wore black veils, in contrast to the white-veiled novices.

⁵ Ellen Whitty entered the convent on January 15, 1839, but Annie Fleming, whom Catherine is evidently anticipating, did not enter until February 5, 1839.

⁶ Either Gregory Lynch or Joseph Lynch, both of whom were curates at St. Andrew's, Westland Row.

Tell me, could you read all this? God preserve and bless you, my Dear Sister – pray fervently for your

ever affectionate

M.C. McAuley

On reading this over – I find it quite in a random style. It must stay so. I charge you not to let *this* out of your hand.

The next frank I will write to all my Dear Sisters.