



Letter From Catherine McAuley

**Sister M. Frances Warde
Carlow**

**Convent of the Sisters of Mercy
Limerick
October 25 [1838]**

My ever Dear Sister Mary Frances

My mind has been uneasy at not writing to you – and even yet I cannot say when I shall be able to leave this foundation – which with much to excite hope and expectation, has still much, very much, to contend with. It is quite novel to see those who have the smallest means most afraid to join – in which they are encouraged by the Priests – who say: If this breaks up – as three other communities have done – they would be nuns – but what House would take them in without support, as they never could be regarded like full subjects. The friends of such as have property excite their fears that they would be obliged to go where they might not like. Such a perplexing conflict as we have almost daily. Notwithstanding, I hope two will soon come. Sister Potter and a Miss O'Farrell are come.¹

I cannot go for a full month. No person of less experience could manage at present – and I am very insufficient for the task. As to Sister Elizabeth, with all her readiness to undertake it – we never sent forward such a feint-hearted [*sic*] soldier, now that she is in the field. She will do all interior & exterior work, but to meet on business – confer with the Bishop – conclude with a Sister – you might as well send the child that opens the door. I am sure this will surprise you. She gets white as death – and her eyes like fever. She is greatly liked – and when alarms are a little over and a few in the House, I expect all will go on well.²

¹ Ellen Potter entered the Limerick community on the evening the foundation party arrived, September 24, 1838. Miss O'Farrell received the habit on December 4, 1838 and may have been one of "the three" who professed their vows on December 9, 1839, but she is not listed at this point in the Limerick Register of professed sisters. However, she is mentioned – as "Sister O'Farrell" – in two letters of Catherine McAuley in February 1841. In the present letter Catherine may have written "O'Farrell" and then wetted out the O. For more discussion of Miss O'Farrell (or Farrell) see Letter 238, note 82. The two postulants Catherine anticipates are presumably Joanna Bridgeman and Mary Anne Bridgeman who entered the Limerick community on November 1, 1838 and December 8, 1838 respectively.

² Mary Elizabeth Moore, the superior of the Limerick community, was thirty-two years old at the time. She subsequently became one of the most courageous early Mercy founders – opening new foundations in numerous places in Ireland and Scotland, ministering during the Famine, and serving those in jail who were condemned to death. See Courtney, "Fearless Mother Elizabeth Moore", and Sullivan, Catherine McAuley 247 – 57.

Sister Vincent was professed yesterday, thank God³ – we were obliged to admit many persons.

They do not know in Baggot Street that I am to be so long away. It seems providential that the charge there is very much lessened – on account of the Building – only 10 young women are kept and no school. Still I must announce it by degrees – as my poor Sister de Pazzi is now subject to dreadful attacks.⁴

Sister Mary Teresa expressed such disappointment at not going to the consecration of your Convent that she must come & Sr. Cecilia – with three from this. Can you pack five of us – and will we be time enough in about a month? I had a letter from Sister White – but did not yet tell her she should go – as it would not be well the others knew it till the time comes.⁵

Write to me and say particularly how you are. Mr McCormick was here. He said you looked very well, but had some return of your distressing feelings.⁶ I look forward with delight to the day I shall see you once more.

³ Mary Vincent (Anna Maria) Harnett, now twenty-seven years old, had come from Baggot Street as a novice, having received the habit on July 1, 1837. She professed her vows on October 24, 1838, one month after their arrival in Limerick. For a discussion of the correct spelling of her surname, and for biographical details, see Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 130 - 38

⁴ Mary de Pazzi Delany did not become Catherine McAuley's formally appointed assistant at Baggot Street until March 1840 (see Letter 166). However, as one of the earliest members of the Dublin community, having joined on July 12, 1830, she was – after Mary Ann Doyle, Frances Warde and Clare Moore went to their respective foundations in 1836 – 1837 – regularly left in charge when Catherine went out of town. Her noted reluctance to have Catherine away from Baggot Street and the effect of this reluctance on her propensity to “attacks” similar to epilepsy made Catherine's necessary travel to new foundations very difficult. Messages were often sent to her, urging her to return before her work at a new foundation was completed. The trip to Cork, Charleville, and Limerick, with the stop in Carlow on her return to Dublin, was the longest she ever took – just over three months. Her apprehension about the situation in Dublin is revealed in her letters from Limerick, especially in Letter 101 to Mary de Pazzi herself.

⁵ Catherine was planning to attend a reception ceremony in Carlow on her way home from Limerick. May Aloysius Scott, Mary Xavier O'Connell and she would be coming from Limerick, and Mary Teresa White and Mary Cecilia Marmion from Dublin. Catherine's reference to the “consecration” of the Carlow convent is confusing, unless she means the episcopal consecration of Francis Haly (March 25, 1838), which she missed, and not the consecration of the new Carlow convent which did not occur until July 2, 1839, though the new chapel was blessed on April 2, 1839. It is entirely possible that Catherine has simply lost track of what events have occurred in Carlow in the last seventeen months – not having been there herself since the first stone of the new convent was laid on May 20, 1837 (Carlow Annals). In this paragraph, one sees her unwillingness to let Mary de Pazzi know too soon that she will stop in Carlow on her way home and thus add two days to her time away.

⁶ As mentioned in earlier letters, Frances Wardes was ill in April and May 1838. The exact nature of her ailment is not known. Although a Reverend M. McCormick served in the diocese of Limerick in 1838, Catherine is probably referring to a visit from her longtime friend, John McCormick, a curate in the Booterstown, Blackrock and Dundrum parish (Irish Catholic Directory [1838] 285, 269). Father McCormick died on September 17, 1841 at the age of sixty-eight (Irish Catholic Directory [1842], 437). In his will signed on August 6, 1835 or 1831, he bequeathed “My three Houses Value one Thousand pounds for Miss McGauley & the Sisters of Mercy in Baggot Street”; in the will he notes that “My niece is in Baggot St. Convent on the income of the Houses” (Dublin Diocesan Archives, Murray Papers, AB3/33/9, no. 20). His niece Anne O'Grady entered the Baggot Street community on January 21, 1829, but died of consumption on February 8, 1832, just after the founding of the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831. Since I am unaware of any other niece of Father McCormick who entered the Baggot Street community, I am inclined to read the not altogether legible year in his will as 1831, even though the Diocesan Archives reads it as 1835 (Archivium Hibernicum 42:52). John McCormick had visited Catherine McAuley's sister Mary in 1827, when she was dying in Dundrum, and received her back into the Catholic Church (Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 41, 47).

This House is fully in the old conventual style – very bad all around as to neighbourhood – but when within the gates, quite a nice place – enclosed by the Ruins of an abbey – and green in every view. It has been put into the best repair and furnished in our own style. We have never seen the foundress – this is Gospel perfection. She would not even ask for a Ticket to the Ceremony.⁷

We had a very good sermon – good private singers – and my most *angelic* Sister Aloysius at the piano – I never knew her perfectly till now. Sister Elizabeth often says she believes there is no mixture of human feelings remaining in her⁸ – so unalterably sweet and placid and unceasing day and night in her efforts to promote this object. She is everything at all times – how did I live so long with such a person and not know her? The sweetest we ever had could be a little disturbed, particularly on occasions like this – but she is never moved – in looks or manner.

We finished the two 30 days' Prayers⁹ – on the 23rd – one in the morning and one in the evening – and are now going to say the whole Psalter for 15 days – this is our best hope.¹⁰

Miss Delaney, I believe, is much changed. She was quite satisfactory when I saw her – and is to be received on the 29th. A niece of Sister Angela's – Miss Lawler – I believe from Kilkenny – is coming to them. She has 38 pounds per year. They have commenced building a convent.¹¹

Do not say a word of any fears about Limerick that could reach a Limerick person. Revd. Mr. Rouley [Raleigh] knows your Sr. Kelly.¹² Every word takes wing – and I have not given this account to anyone but you – not to Sr. de Pazzi. If they thought I was speaking unfavourable, I would get nothing done these three months. All my language must be encouraging. Some Carlow Priests write to Priests here.

Give my most affectionate love to all. Sisters M. E. & Aloysius, M. Xavier and Mrs Harnett desire their best love to you – the latter is in good spirits – read her vows very well.

May God bless and preserve you, my ever dearest child, is the constant prayer of your ever fond

M. C. McAuley

⁷ The principal benefactor of the Limerick community was Miss Helena Heffernan who in 1836m if the Sisters of Mercy could be persuaded to come to Limerick, "assigned for that purpose [a major portion of] the estate bequeathed to her by her brother, Patrick McMahon Heffernan, of the County of Limerick" (Limerick Annals). She established a Trust which allotted "one hundred pounds annual to [the] Institution of Mercy [in Limerick] during her life; two hundred annually after [her] death," as well as several annuities to other charitable projects (qtd. In M. L. O'Connor 25). Miss Heffernan died on August 4, 1860. For a full account of this remarkable woman, see M. L. O'Connor, "Helena Heffernan, a true Limerick Woman."

⁸ That is, in Mary Aloysius Scott.

⁹ Catherine McAuley wrote "2 30 days Prayer," but for clarity I have changed this to two 30 days' Prayers." (See Letter 96, note 8).

¹⁰ The Psalter of Jesus was one Catherine McAuley's most frequent personal prayers. For the text and further explanation, see Sullivan, "Prayers" 48 – 51, 57 – 67. The Psalter of Jesus consists of fifteen petitions; Catherine is planning to pray one petition each day.

¹¹ Frances Delaney, who entered the Charleville community in May, will receive the habit on October 29. She is not listed in the Charleville Register of professed sisters. Margaret Lawless entered the Charleville community on July 4, 1838; in August 1845 she will leave to join an Ursuline community in Ennis. The Register gives England as her native place. Margaret Lalor will enter the Charleville convent on October 29, 1838. The Register lists her native place as Tully, Co. Kildare. Catherine McAuley may have confused these two women.

¹² Catherine wrote "Rouley," but she evidently means James Raleigh, a curate in St. Michael's parish, Limerick, since no other priest's name in the Limerick diocese at this time comes close to her spelling. She often spelled names phonetically – especially ones she had not seen in print. James Raleigh served in the parish where Patrick Hogan was parish priest.

As yours is the first convent erected for our order, except our first – B. St.¹³ – we ought to pay it every tribute of regard - & bring our best music.

If I left this before a month, I should leave Sister Aloysius – and that I think better not to do.¹⁴

¹³ Baggot Street, Dublin.

¹⁴The three postscript sentences are written in the top or bottom margins of pages 2 and 3 of the letter.

