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Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary: The Philadelphia Connection 1833-1843

Ann M. Harrington, BVM

Philadelphia is dear to the hearts of all Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (known commonly as BVMs) because it is in this city that the congregation had its beginnings. Just twenty-five years after the founding of the diocese, Mary Frances Clarke and four companions decided to move to Philadelphia from Dublin in order to teach Irish immigrants in need of Catholic education. The foundation of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is dated November 1, 1833, a mere two months after they arrived in the city.

Mary Frances Clarke, the founder of the BVMs grew up in Dublin in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as did her companions Margaret Mann, Eliza Kelly, Rose O'Toole, and Catherine Byrne. Mary Frances Clarke assisted her father in his leather goods establishment, and took over the book keeping when he became ill. Margaret Mann ran a millinery business in Dublin, employing some twenty women and girls. Eliza Kelly was from a well to do family, and received private tutoring. Rose O'Toole's widowed mother ran a boarding house, and Rose undoubtedly helped out. Of the founding five, she had the least education. The last to join the founding five was Catherine Byrne, who grew up in an orphanage run by the Poor Clares at Harold's Cross in south Dublin. She had training in pharmacology and nursing.

The women were greatly influenced by the developing Roman Catholic Church both in Dublin and in Philadelphia. Even though at almost every step these women were required to seek the approval or counsel from priests and bishops as they continued their work, they were able to retain their own identity and conduct their ministries in a manner they felt appropriate. Their priest helper, Irish-born Terence James Donaghoe, whom they met shortly after settling in Philadelphia, served as pastor of St. Joseph's parish and, later, St. Michael's parish. The relationship that developed between the five women and Donaghoe had a profound influence on what would become the BVM congregation, as will become evident.

This paper seeks to shed light on four issues: how the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary were founded in Philadelphia where they are little known today;

Figure 1. Plaque commemorating BVM beginnings in St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Willings Alley near Fourth Street.

what their connections were to St. Joseph's and St. Michael's parishes; why they left Philadelphia and moved to the Iowa Territory after just ten years; and how the time spent in Philadelphia influenced their future development as a religious congregation that has had over 5,000 members.

The women who became the first BVMs met as Franciscan Tertiaries in Dublin, Ireland and in 1831 decided to rent a little cottage where they could live together, and where they might test community life and prayer together. By the spring of 1832, they opened a school on Anne Street North called Miss Clarke's Seminary. Their purpose was to teach—both the poor and those who could pay. As Franciscan tertiaries, after a year-long trial period, they were allowed to make promises “to keep all the divine precepts” and to acknowledge any failures in this regard.¹

Philadelphia Connection

The first question to be answered is why the BVMs were founded in Philadelphia when the first five members came from Ireland. Why did they not join one of the established congregations in Dublin at the time; for example, the Presentation Sisters (1775), the Irish Sisters of Charity (1815), the Loreto Sisters (1820), or the Sisters of

1. “The Nicholas Rule,” from the Bull *Supra Montem* of Nicholas IV, August 17, 1289, translated copy in the Mt. Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa. This rule was in effect until 1883. See revised rule, *The Seraphic Guide A Manuel for the Members of the Third Order of St. Francis* (New York: Benziger Brothers, third revised edition 1884/1902).

Figure 2. Mary Frances Clarke, 1802-1887, Founder, Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.² Used with permission of Eleanor Wallace, DePaul University.

Mercy (1831)? In a work based on interviews with the earliest members of the BVM congregation, Pulcheria McGuire wrote in 1905, “the Sisters feared to mention to the archbishop the subject that engrossed their minds, lest he should require them to affiliate with one of the existing orders.”³ This indicates that they did not choose to be part of an existing order. Even though Eliza Kelly helped out at Catherine McAuley’s establishment on Lower Baggott Street in Dublin, where she made garments for the poor, she apparently never considered becoming a Sister of Mercy. It is interesting to note that she worked there with the daughters of Daniel O’Connell, Ireland’s great

2. Mary Frances Clarke never allowed herself to be photographed. When she died, she was photographed in her coffin, the photographer remains unknown. Eleanor Wallace, DePaul University, constructed this digital image from an original photo of Mary Frances Clarke in her coffin. The image is used here with her permission. It contains as well scanned artifacts, including her bonnet from BVM Romana Walter’s painting, and a photo taken by Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM, of Mary Frances Clarke’s shawl on the shoulders of BVM Ann Eileen Clancy.

3. Pulcheria McGuire, BVM, *Annals* (404 page typescript, 1905, Mt. Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa), 16. See also Ann M. Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions* (Mount Carmel Press, Dubuque, Iowa, 2004); M. Jane Coogan, B.V.M., *The Price of Our Heritage* (Mount Carmel Press, Dubuque, Iowa, 1975); Lambertina Doran, *In the Early Days: Pages from the Annals of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1925). For more details on T.J. Donaghoe see Kathryn Lawlor, BVM, ed., *Terence J. Donaghoe: Co-founder of the Sisters of Charity, BVM* (Mount Carmel Press: Dubuque, Iowa, 1995).

emancipator. Further, they were no doubt aware of the opposition to Catherine McAuley's work from some supporters of Mary Aikenhead, the founder of the Irish Sisters of Charity. These critics "were fearful that Catherine McAuley's new community, which was already assuming some of the features of religious life, would undermine what Mary Aikenhead and her companions were attempting to achieve. They did not believe that Dublin was either financially or demographically capable of supporting two similar congregations of women."⁴ It would make sense that Mary Frances Clarke and companions felt that the archbishop would not welcome another new religious congregation in Dublin.

In the spring of 1833, Mary Frances Clarke and her companions met a priest from Philadelphia, Patrick Costello, who was in Dublin recovering his health; and he offered to be their chaplain. He told the women of the sorry plight of Catholic education in Philadelphia. The Irish were discriminated against both for their faith and their ethnicity. Attempts to provide education for working class Irish, much less Catholic education, were difficult in these times. Costello invited the women to go with him when he returned to Philadelphia where he said they were needed to teach Irish immigrants. McGuire indicates that the missionary idea was not entirely new to them, but says no more than that.⁵ Costello's invitation was rather quickly accepted as God's will for them. They could continue to teach and live as a community of women.

Costello's health improved sooner than they had anticipated, and he returned to Philadelphia that same spring but informed the women that he would make all the arrangements for them: inform the coadjutor bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick, of their impending arrival, meet them when they arrived, and take them to their lodgings that he would have ready for them. Margaret Mann, viewed by her companions as the second of the women in terms of her authority in the small group, noticed that Costello seemed somewhat mentally unbalanced, but whether or not she shared that observation with the other women at that time, we do not know.⁶

The morning the women were to leave for the United States, July 13, 1833, the priest who celebrated Mass for them was Peter Kenrick, the brother of the bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick. He discouraged the women from going to the United States, probably because his brother had shared with him some of the difficulties of the expanding diocese of Philadelphia, especially the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment prevalent in the city. The women took no heed of his words. Years later, when Peter Kenrick was archbishop of St. Louis, at an event in his honor, he thanked God that the women had not taken his advice that July morning.⁷

Four of the women left from Dublin and traveled to Liverpool, where on July 18, 1833 they boarded the *Cassander* for New York harbor. Rose O'Toole, the fifth who

4. Seamus Enright, "Women and Catholic Life in Dublin, 1766-1852," *History of the Catholic Diocese of Dublin*, eds. James Kelly and Daire Keogh (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 287.

5. McGuire, 16.

6. Clipping found in Mary Frances Clarke's file in the Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

7. McGuire, "Notes," n.p. Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

was to have joined them, stayed in Dublin to tend to business after her mother's death, thus she could not join them until spring of 1834. After crossing the Atlantic and weathering some rough sea, they arrived safely in New York on August 31. They were unable to disembark until September 2. As they climbed down the rope ladder, one of their group, Eliza Kelly, who was holding the money in a purse for the group, let it slip from her grasp and it dropped into the harbor. Consequently, the women arrived in New York with almost no money, and there was no Fr. Costello to meet them. They may have assumed that he would meet them in Philadelphia. Even though invited by the pastor of Old St. Peter's in the diocese of New York to stay and teach there, they moved on to Philadelphia.⁸

When trying to trace what happened to Costello, and why he is not mentioned again in the oral history of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Philadelphian Archdiocesan Historical Research Center (PAHRC) provided assistance. It appears that there may have been two Patrick Costellos in Philadelphia at the time, one a deacon, and ordained in 1836. This position obviously precluded the service of the first as the chaplain for the small Dublin community of women. The other, documented in the *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, notes that a P.M. Costello is listed as the priest who baptized Patrick, the son of Michael and Anna (Smyth) Fitzpatrick at St. John the Evangelist Church in Philadelphia on August 30, 1833.⁹ A BVM historian says "that the sisters learned later that 'his mind had become deranged.'"¹⁰ Whether or not this is the same Patrick Costello is uncertain. We have no definite information of what became of him.

Even though their priest host never appeared, the women experienced some of the brotherly (and sisterly) love one might hope to find in the city, first from a stranger, who directed them to St. Joseph's church in Willings Alley, and then meeting on Fourth and Spruce Street, Mrs. Margaret Andrews McDonogh (McDonough) who ran a small grocery store and was well known in the parish. Margaret McDonogh put them up for two nights until they found a place to rent in Willings Alley nearer the church, apparently in a building where her daughter lived. However, right next door to St. Joseph's Church, there was a Quaker almshouse settlement, and one could question if the women might have found lodging there since Mary Clarke had Quaker heritage from her mother's side of the family. There are no records to support this, but all records the women kept during these days were destroyed by a fire in 1849, save a page of accounts.¹¹

Margaret McDonough introduced the women to Terence James Donaghoe, an Irish priest born in the town of Aughnacloy, County Tyrone. In August of 1820, he went to

8. Coogan, 26.

9. Vol. XX, 372. I am grateful to Shawn Weldon, assistant archivist, Philadelphian Archdiocesan Historical Research Center (PAHRC) for providing me with this information.

10. Lambertina Doran, 18.

11. The fire occurred at the BVM motherhouse when it was located about eight miles southwest of Dubuque on what BVMs refer to as "the prairie."

Figure 3. Terence James Donaghoe, 1795-1869. Used with permission of the BVM Archives, Dubuque, IA.

Paris and studied at the Picpus Seminary, where he was ordained in 1823. Donaghoe left Paris in 1824, served in the state of New York, then in Reading, Pennsylvania, and in 1826 was named to St. Joseph's in Willings Alley where he served as a curate of St. Joseph's from 1827 to 1829 when he was named pastor of the parish. Then, in May of 1833, the bishop named him pastor of St. Michael's, a new parish still under construction, in the Irish-dominated Kensington area of Philadelphia. Terence Donaghoe was a good friend of Margaret McDonough. She spoke fondly of the Dublin women to him. He was still living at St. Joseph's and was helping out at the parish. When Donaghoe met the Irish women on September 10, shortly after their arrival and learned their story and their reasons for coming to Philadelphia, he became interested in them as teachers for his future school at St. Michael's parish.

The women took in sewing to make their way. A Miss S.S. Willis, at 62 South Eleventh Street, referred piecework and finishing to the sisters. Meanwhile, by mid-October, the sisters began conducting classes in a building rented by Donaghoe at 520 North Second Street. The school was named Sacred Heart, a favorite devotion of Mary Clarke. The sisters continued to take in sewing to supplement their meager income. For two full years after St. Michael's Church was completed and the free school was opened there, the women continued to live in Willings Alley and teach in the school on North Second Street. Eventually, the sisters moved their school and residence to a large house on Second Street, opposite Laurel, where there was a second

Figure 4. Interior of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Willings Alley near Fourth Street, from a drawing made before its demolition, about 1838. Could these be the founding BVMs? Courtesy of the Parish Archives.

residence. Then, in November of 1838, the women moved again, this time to the newly completed Sacred Heart Academy on the southeast corner of Second and Phoenix (now Thompson Street), two blocks south of St. Michael's. At this time, the BVMs took over the school at St. Michael's when the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg left the parish.¹² In addition, they continued to take care of their own tuition-paying students and boarders.

From records in the BVM archives, we learn that Mary Frances Clarke taught arithmetic and provided handwriting models for the children as they learned to write. Margaret Mann and Rose O'Toole never taught. And there is no mention that at this time Eliza Kelly taught, but there are indications that she kept the annals of the group. Mrs. Hunt, the aunt of a Mrs. Baker, a recently widowed woman who had joined the sisters in the Phoenix Street residence, taught classes in music to the children and gave private lessons to the young women who had joined the growing community. The two other staff members are mentioned, one a man who taught the boys, and a Mrs. O'Connor who taught, but no more information is available.¹³

Donaghoe himself was also in the midst of deciding his future. He had contemplated joining the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, who had founded St. Joseph's parish.

12. See Emmitsburg Area Historical Society at <http://www.emmitsburg.net/setonshrine/> for Elizabeth Ann Seton and additional information on her sisters. This group eventually becomes the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul in the 1850s.

13. Coogan, vol.1, 126.

In a retreat he made in November at the Jesuit novitiate under the direction of his spiritual advisor, Jesuit Francis Dzierozynski, his path became clear to him. According to early BVM historians, Dzierozynski asked a young Jesuit novice, Brother Faye, to pray for his retreatant. He gave him no further information. The message that Brother Faye conveyed to Donaghoe's retreat director went as follows: "Father, tell that person he is not to become a Jesuit. This will greatly disappoint him; but tell him for his consolation that the far west will one day resound with the praises of the Children of Mary."¹⁴

For Donaghoe, this was the message that convinced him that God was calling him to work with these newly met Irish women and to help them found a religious congregation. They, in turn, could continue to provide teachers for his new parish. On November 1, 1833, the association between Terence Donaghoe and the women became more formalized as they pronounced their vows and became the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin, under the direction of Donaghoe.¹⁵ He assured the women that they had the blessings of the bishop, and that they would continue to have a place teaching at St. Michael's school.

What the women did not know, or apparently did not question, is which bishop had given the blessing. The church in Philadelphia at this time had two bishops, aging Bishop Henry Conwell and Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, named coadjutor in 1830. Kenrick had the administrative authority, and Conwell retained only episcopal functions such as securing papal blessings, administering the sacrament of Confirmation, and conferring Holy Orders on the men designated by Kenrick. However, Conwell never really let go of his administrative power. It appears that Donaghoe was sympathetic to Conwell, who was from Ireland and was pastor in neighboring Dungannon. He had served as the vicar general of the Armagh archdiocese, and had tutored the seventeen-year-old Donaghoe when he was studying Latin in Aghnacloy. It was Conwell, apparently, who had authorized Donaghoe to help form a religious community. This is inferred from the message Mary Frances Clarke received from Kenrick in 1839. Dated October 2, 1839 and written in Latin, the translation reads:

Respected Miss Clarke,

As several persons have spoken to me of you and the ladies associated with you as a religious community, I feel bound to inquire into the nature of your institute, the laws of the Church forbidding the establishment of any religious institute in a diocese without the sanction of the Bishop. I request, therefore, your attendance on Monday next at 10 o'clock at

14. Doran, *In the Early Days*, 28.

15. Since all of the women were Franciscan tertiaries, they may have been simply renewing those promises, now as vows. Also it is important to mention that only four of the founding women were present. Rose O'Toole had to stay behind to care for an aging parent. Even though she arrived the following spring, she was counted as having made this new commitment on November 1, 1833 and is listed as the third member of the newly formed community. Note also, the name leaves out the word charity. That was added when the sisters moved to Dubuque, allegedly by Bishop Mathias Loras of Dubuque.

my house, to explain this matter, and beg of you to come furnished with such documents as may be in your possession to prove your claim to be considered a religious community, in case you wish to be regarded as such. I also wish to be informed what interest you claim in the house now occupied by you. I remain with respect

Your Father in X
Francis Patrick¹⁶

The congregation has no record of what transpired at the meeting, nor can we be certain what documents Mary Frances Clarke brought to the bishop. What we do know is that the congregation dates its origin to November 1, 1833, and that the women not only stayed in Philadelphia until 1843, but brought into the fold fourteen new members during those years. There is some evidence that Donaghoe feared that Kenrick would not actually sanction a new order of religious women in his diocese at this time.¹⁷ The reason given is Kenrick's experience with two French sisters, who called themselves *Les Dames de la Retraite*, which made him wary of any religious not duly constituted.¹⁸ As historian Jane Coogan, BVM, notes, the young community probably had two choices, from Kenrick's point of view: make a novitiate with an established religious order before proceeding to make their little group official; or join with the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, already in the diocese.¹⁹ The situation mirrors their earlier experience in Dublin, and again, as with their decision to leave Dublin, it seems they had no desire to join an established order.

Notes made by BVM Lambertina Doran in the 1890s indicate what seems obvious: Donaghoe had also been interviewed by Kenrick prior to Mary Frances Clarke. She indicates that the bishop made clear he had never given his approval to the women as a religious community. When he asked Donaghoe if he had a new community, Donaghoe replied that he had some ladies employed who were of great assistance to him. When asked if they had a religious rule, he replied that they go to the sacraments, visit the sick, and help in many ways; teaching was assumed. When asked if they were religious, Donaghoe replied that they kept the commandments. The notes add, "Hence the Sisters were called the Sisters of the Decalogue. Father Donaghoe once said as if it slipped, 'He (meaning Bishop Kenrick) had not the courage to tell me to disband them.'"²⁰ Whatever the exact circumstances, the sisters remained in Philadelphia, and no further steps were taken to make the young com-

16. Francis Patrick Kenrick, *Journal*, 185. PAHRC. A handwritten account by the bishop in Latin which includes copies of correspondence that he felt concerned significant matters. See Coogan, 146, n. 45.

17. Mary Michael Nihill, BVM, unpublished "Notes," Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa. Mary Michael entered the congregation in 1852, and later kept notes of her conversations with the early members.

18. See Coogan, p. 88, n.74. The women apparently succeeded in convincing Bishop Kenrick to provide funds for an academy for young ladies. Their venture failed in less than six months and they left town. See also Peter Guilday, *Life and Times of John England*, Vol. II., 142, 150, cited by Coogan.

19. Coogan, 120.

20. Doran, *Journal*, 11. Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

munity officially recognized. The sisters continued to teach in the school, and continued to take in new members.

By the mid 1830s, the sisters had left their residence at Second Street, just opposite Laurel Street and were living just two blocks south of St. Michael's parish. The new Sacred Heart School, along with their residence, was located on the southeast corner of Second and Phoenix (now Thompson) streets.

But change was in the air. When Donaghoe was serving at St. Joseph's parish, his boyhood friend, John Hughes, was assigned there as a young curate in 1827. As early as 1837, when Hughes left Philadelphia to become coadjutor bishop of the New York diocese, the latter began issuing invitations to Donaghoe and his little community to join him in New York. Once again, Donaghoe consulted his spiritual director, and his answer in a letter dated April 1841 was clear: taking that course of action would not be good for the church, the community of women he was directing, nor for himself.²¹

Move to Iowa

What happened next provides the answer to the question of why the women did not stay in Philadelphia. John J. Norman, a young man who taught Sunday school for Donaghoe before the sisters arrived, had moved to Dubuque where Bishop Mathias Loras of the newly formed Dubuque diocese had hired him to teach boys at the cathedral parish and to serve as the organist. It was Norman who told Loras of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Loras had been trying to entice the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg to come to Dubuque, but he had no success. When Loras contacted Donaghoe, he and the sisters made a novena to St. Joseph that ended on March 19, 1842. At that same time, Norman visited Philadelphia, and this convinced Donaghoe, and, we assume, the sisters that God willed that they go to Dubuque in the Iowa Territory to teach the Native Americans. In the fall of 1842, Jesuit Pierre de Smet visited the sisters and told many stories of his experiences working with the Native Americans, certainly helpful in planning their new move. The congregation made their first public commitment of their vows under Mathias Loras in Dubuque in 1845.

How then did the Philadelphia years help shape this young BVM community of women? First of all, they found themselves left to their own resources upon arrival in Philadelphia, and they felt deeply that God was leading them in the direction they were to go. Costello's failure to be there to meet them, and to provide lodging for them, led them to St. Joseph's parish, which had special meaning for them, and put them in touch with T. J. Donaghoe, who was very much discerning his own future. They began a life-long relationship with him, and his importance to the BVMs is evi-

21. For a detailed and perceptive analysis of Donaghoe's early life and various relationships in Philadelphia, see Mary D. DeCock, "Terence J. Donaghoe: His Missionary Career," in Kathryn Lawlor, BVM, ed., *Terence J. Donaghoe: Co-founder of the Sisters of Charity, BVM* (Dubuque, Iowa: Mount Carmel Press, 1995), 10-56.

dent and without question.²² The time in Philadelphia gave the women a chance to adjust to the United States, to become more effective in what they were trying to do, namely provide Catholic education to Irish immigrants. After their experience in beginning a school in Dublin, they had the experience of running two more schools while in Philadelphia, and there is no indication that they were anything but successful. The interaction of Mary Frances Clarke and the bishop, Francis Patrick Kenrick, introduced her to some of the church structures and expectations the community would encounter in the future, experiences that Mary Clarke would handle with strength, courtesy, and wisdom.

Once again, the status of the newly formed sisters came into question. Loras learned that the five women who would be going to Dubuque, were not from a community officially approved by the church. They had written authorization neither from the bishop of Philadelphia, nor from the Holy See. Therefore, Loras repeated his invitation to the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg in hopes that they had changed their minds. As it turned out, they were still unable to accept his invitation. Loras then returned to the BVMs and reluctantly said he would accompany the sisters to Dubuque on his way back from the Fifth Provincial Council of Baltimore of 1843. He and five of the sisters left Philadelphia on June 5, 1843. Donaghoe confided in a letter to his friend Bishop Hughes that he had made clear to Loras that eventually all the sisters must go or none would.²³ By the fall of 1843, the rest of the fledgling community made its way west to join the five who had gone on ahead. As with their beginnings, once again things turned out differently from their expectations. After arrival in Dubuque, the sisters did not teach the Native Americans; rather they began educating the daughters and sons of the miners and settlers in the growing Iowa Territory. Also, it is clear that the sisters made a positive impression on the bishop. He writes on July 5, 1843:

Our Sisters are so far pleased & in perfect health, they sigh after nothing else but the arrival of the principal colony. The people are highly pleased with them. They commenced their school this morning and expect to have soon large [sic]. I expected to have some borders, but I shall not do it in order to leave all the space for the balance of the family.²⁴

Left in the Philadelphia residence of the sisters were three women: Mary Baker, a new community member of British heritage who remained there to settle her husband's estate; one other new member, Elizabeth Sullivan; Mary Baker's niece, Mrs. Hill; and Jane O'Reilly, the youngest of four O'Reilly sisters, whose three older sisters were members of the community by that time. On Monday, May 6, 1844, the convent was burned by anti-Catholic Nativists and rendered uninhabitable, though

22. In Coogan's two volume work, the place of Terence James Donaghoe meets with some skepticism. In my work, I find nothing that indicates the sisters did not admire him, trust him, and he them.

23. December 27, 1843. BVM Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

24. Mathias Loras, bishop of Dubuque, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa. Mathias Loras' native language was French.

Figure 5. 1984 BVMs, led by president of the congregation, Helen Maher Garvey, celebrating the congregation's 150th anniversary at St. Joseph's Church. used with permission of the BVM Archives, Dubuque, IA.

none of the women was badly hurt. Mary Baker, who could not believe anyone would hurt an unarmed woman, opened the door and was hit on the head and knocked unconscious by a rock thrown by one of the angry rioters. On May 8, St. Michael's church was burned beyond repair.²⁵ The early history of the BVMs created in the 1890s and early 1900s from the remembrances of the early members makes a point of the fact that the sisters did not leave Philadelphia because of the Nativists; the decision had already been made and almost all had left before violence threatened them directly.

Philadelphia days obviously had a strong, formative influence on the sisters and the congregation. They deepened their already strong and continually tested faith. Each of the traumas they endured taught them that God was watching over them and their new endeavor. They chose to continue their relationship with Terence James Donaghoe, and work with him to build and establish schools in the Iowa Territory, the first religious order of women to do so. They built their motherhouse on a prairie about eight miles southwest of Dubuque, and then moved their center to Dubuque in

25. James F. Connelly, ed., *The History of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 1976), 178-185. See also Doran, *In the Early Days*, 119. Donaghoe sued the County of Philadelphia for damages, and the suit was settled in June of 1846 in Donaghoe's favor. St. Michael's was awarded \$27, 090.02; \$6400 remained for the convent after paying off the fees related to the suit. Connelly, 119.

1893, where it remains to this day. The campus now houses over 200 sisters in the motherhouse, the assisted living wing, and the infirmary.

Mary Frances Clarke's seemingly unwavering faith in God and her unceasing attempts to do God's will, governed her life, and this remains a lasting legacy for the BVMs. The trials revolving around the failed promises of Costello, the discrimination the sisters experienced in Philadelphia because they were Irish and Catholic, their questionable status as religious women, their lack of public recognition from the bishop of Philadelphia, helped strengthen them for the trials that lay ahead. Fourteen women chose to enter the newly formed congregation in Philadelphia, which attests to the seriousness of their endeavor, and to the unquestioned dating of the foundation of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary to November 1, 1833, in Philadelphia, 176 years ago.

BVM Growth and Expansion

The sisters sought canonical status after Donaghoe's death in 1869, and received from the Holy See a Decree of Praise in 1877; a Decree of Approbation that same year; and a Decree of Final Confirmation in 1885. Before Mary Frances Clarke died in 1887, the BVMs, who numbered over 500, had extended their outreach from Iowa to Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas, Missouri, and California, making Brother Faye's prophecy, that "the far west will one day resound with the praises of the Children of Mary," all the more poignant. At its height in 1965, at the close of Vatican II, the congregation numbered 2,555 sisters, in 174 houses, staffing many grade schools, high schools, and two colleges, Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, and Mundelein College in Chicago, Illinois. BVMs served in twenty of the fifty United States, and in Bogotá, Colombia and Quito, Ecuador.

The congregation continues today in twenty-three states, the District of Columbia, in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Ghana. BVMs today total 550 sisters involved in a variety of works including education, hospice work, prison ministry, immigration work, parish ministry, and most important, prayer ministry among retired and ill sisters.

In 1972, the congregation initiated an associate program.²⁶ It began rather slowly, and then in the 1990s, grew more rapidly. Today, there are over 160 BVM associates who come from twenty-three U.S. states, Washington D.C., and Ecuador. They are women and men from many faith traditions who are single, married, or widowed. Associates live independently and maintain a mutual relationship with vowed members of the BVM community. With BVMs, associates affirm the BVM charism/mision of "being freed and helping others enjoy freedom in God's steadfast love," the core values of freedom, education, charity and justice, and the traditions of the BVM community.

26. Norman C. Freund, "A History of BVM Association to 2005," (Dubuque, Iowa: Mount Carmel Press, 2005). See also <http://members.bvmcong.org/SistersBVM/Members/index.cfm>.

Each November 1, BVMS remember and celebrate gratefully what all recognize as the congregation's official birth in Philadelphia. They celebrate those roots that got the nourishment, care and pruning needed to develop into a strong and lasting congregation. What started 176 years ago in Philadelphia has sown many seeds, produced much fruit, and continues strong today.