

**Six Go West:
SHCJ Pioneers in America tell their Story**

When I was putting together material for this talk, on the decision to send 6 Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus from England to America in 1862, I found a wealth of primary sources available in our archives. They are the typed and authenticated transcripts of original letters in the **Documentation** prepared for the historical stage of the Canonisation Process of the Venerable Cornelia Connelly, community annals, and the necrologies (obituaries) of the Sisters involved. In the extracts that follow the eccentric punctuation of the originals is preserved.

The Context: America 1862

The political scene. A Civil War was in progress! It was primarily to do with the issue of the abolition of slavery throughout the States of the Federal Union. Back in 1833, the year slavery was abolished in the British colonies, an Anti-Slavery Society was founded in the US, its membership steadily increasing in the Northern States of the Union. The 11 Southern States, whose economy was substantially dependent on slave labour in the vast cotton plantations, grew increasingly alarmed by abolitionism. When Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the Union in 1860, on an anti-slavery manifesto, the 11 States seceded from the Union, formed a Confederation and elected their own President, Jefferson Davis.

After months of uncertainty as to the future war began in April 1861 with an attack by Confederate troops on a Union-held fort in Charleston, S. Carolina. The fighting raged largely in the Southern States as Union armies gradually gained the upper hand. The Confederate States finally surrendered in April 1865.

Catholicism in America Apart from Maryland, southern Louisiana and California (which became a State of the Union in 1850) the Catholic population was above all drawn from successive waves of Catholic immigrants during the 19th century - Irish, Germans, Poles, Italians in particular. The Reverend Pierce and Mrs Cornelia Connelly (future foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus) had become converts through the activities of French missionaries, esp. Jesuits, in Louisiana and up the Mississippi. Other Catholic missionaries were beginning to work amongst the native American Indians and amongst Afro-Americans.

There was a growing sense amongst the bishops that education was a priority in inculcating Catholicism into American life. But how to afford the building of schools and the payment of teachers, unless religious congregations played a major role? Individual bishops looked to Europe for assistance in this respect. After the eventual ordination of Pierce as a Catholic priest in 1845, Cornelia was encouraged by Pope Gregory XVI and Bishop Wiseman to go to England and found a religious order which would have, as one of its primary aims, the education of children of all social classes. American by birth, she longed to establish an American foundation but not until the Duchess of Leeds donated land to the Society, in Towanda, Pennsylvania in early 1861, was she able to approach Bishop James Wood of Philadelphia and Bishop Grant of Southwark. Wood was keen but put plans on hold when the Civil War began and Grant was not unreasonably against sending Sisters into a dangerous situation.

Then, in 1862, Wood was in Europe for the canonization of the Japanese Martyrs and in July came to England to visit Bishop Grant and Cornelia. He met Cornelia at St Leonards on July 21 and matters proceeded with amazing speed. On July 22 Wood consented to let a group of Sisters come if Grant agreed. Next day Grant agreed as long as the Sisters chosen to go left a signed certificate that they went willingly; he also insisted that they would be free to return till the end of 1865 and that money could be sent to them during that time.

D 29, p 166 Dr Wood's Certificate:

"I cordially consent to a branch of the Mother House of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus at St Leonard's [sic] - on - Sea being established in my diocese.

And I consent to their accompanying me on their journey provided they have the cordial consent of their Bishop Dr Grant. + James F Wood

B^p of Phil^a

St Leonards-on-Sea

July 22nd 1862"

D29, p 161 Bishop Grant's consent

"St George's

July 23.1862

Rev^d Mother Superior

Provided the conditions described in my letters about the Philadelphia foundation are fulfilled subject to this one modification that the sisters will be free to return until the end of 1865 and not later, and that no money is to be sent from England after July 23 1862 [*in error for 1865*] and that if any is sent before that date, I must first consent, I am willing to pass the Sisters to Dr Wood's jurisdiction from the date of their departure from Saint Leonards, but I must have certificates from them and from their guardians, that all are quite willing for them to undertake this foundation and to fix themselves in the diocese of Philadelphia.

.....Yours very respectfully

+ Thomas Grant"

The Chosen Six

We don't know exactly how the first 6 pioneers were chosen - whether by Cornelia and her assistants or after a community discussion. What we do have are, thanks to Bishop Grant's insistence, statements by the six affirming their willingness to go to America. Here are three of the six: they have a basic formula with slight variants and different comments about parental consent.

"I desire to go to America and I am quite ready to remain there or be sent where my superiors shall think proper at future times. I am 24 years of age and quite beyond the control of guardians and my parents have willingly consented to my wishes. July 28th 1862
Sr. Lucy Ignatia
Ellen Newsham"

"I am very desirous to go to America, and to remain there or to be sent wherever my superiors may please to send me at future times. I am 27 years of age, my mother is dead, and I have not heard from my father for some years. I know he is willing that I should go to whatever part of the world my superiors think proper to send me.
Sister Agatha Ellen Deacy July 28th, 1862"

The sixth member of the party was only a postulant at the time. She was 22. "I wish to go to America with the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. My parents are dead and I have no guardian. My uncle lives in America and I have a sister there. Another aunt lives in England but she has no communication with me and I wish to enter the Order there rather than remain here. Marion MacKay"

The note from Sr Lucy Ignatia's parents reads: "We are quite willing that our daughter, Sr. Lucy Ignatia in religion, should go with the Community to America as it is her wish to go.
Richard Newsham Alice Newsham July 27th, 1862."

Fortunately for us, both Agatha and Lucy Ignatia were enthusiastic letter-writers and Mother Mary Xavier (Eliza Noble), who had been named as the superior of the new community, kept a detailed diary of the voyage, recording in surprisingly graphic language the horrors of sea-sickness! They had berths on the Cunard Line's steamship, *Scotia*, which sailed from Liverpool on the 2nd of August.

The Voyage, Liverpool to New York, 2-12 August 1862

1) On board the *Scotia*: extracts from a letter from Lucy Ignatia **D 30, pp 1-2**

"No 245 & 246 Cabin *Scotia*

Dearest, dearest Revd Mother -

At last we are in our Cabins and almost stupefied at finding ourselves in such excellent spirits. We watched the "Tender" as far as possible and then said the Litany and the Laudate three times in thanksgiving - just as we were finishing almost simultaneously everybody turned round & said "Now dont [*sic*] you just find yourself ready for work" - We went down stairs, took our seidletz [*sic*] powders & as some felt rather squeamish M.M.X. told us to lie down. The Stewardess Mrs Duncan such a kind nice woman, came in & said "Ladies now mind whatever you want ask for, and I will see that you have it - She arranged for us to have our meals as nearly like the Convent as possible - Breakfast 8 Dinner 1 Tea 6 & Refection at 8. She told us that when last at New York the number of wounded soldiers was something fearful - so many who had lost an arm or a leg etc. ...She [*Mrs Duncan*] has been on the sea about 20 yrs and makes the same reflection every time she returns - that everyone ought to go to sea to be able to love God & admire his wonderful works -"

Later in the day, as they walked about on the deck, she records that "A Protestant American Gentleman has just introduced himself to us from New York & wished to know if he could be of any service to us - This is his 18th voyage. He appears liberal & is a great friend to Convents - We did not ask his name."

They were, in fact, to meet much kindness from other passengers and from the Captain and the cabin crew.

2) Mid-Atlantic, feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August: letter in the form of a daily journal from Agatha **D 30, pp 7-11 passim.**

She began this letter by describing their brief visit ashore on Sunday 3rd August, when the *Scotia* anchored off Queenstown (Cork), to take on more passengers, including Bishop Wood. They had time to go to Mass before returning to the ship. In the evening Bishop Wood joined them on deck and mentioned that Miss Seaton was on board "the granddaughter of the famous Mrs Seaton who first brought the sisters of Charity to the United States. Mth Xavier asked where she was & the Bishop looked round the Ship a moment and then turned to us & said "she is working away with that little officer over there" She has just left a convent in France & does not appear overburdened with sense."

Very soon after this they began to suffer from sea-sickness. Agatha says she was one of the worst "altho I tried to keep quiet only saying that sailing on the Atlantic was very different from sailing on the English Channel - I shall never boast again of not being sick - Marion was very ill so we were quite helpless." It seems that a storm further out in the Atlantic had caused the rough seas. They were all "as lively as kittens" by Thursday and able to sit on deck on Friday morning. Bishop Wood turned up and "brought his pocket handkerchiefs to be hemmed and marked." Before they went down for dinner he told M M Xavier "that she was to be sure and take meat and any body else who could not eat much was to do the same without scruple."

3) What to make of their new Bishop - the observer observed: letter from Mary Xavier, 7th August, & comment by Lucy Ignatia D 30, pp. 16-18, 22-23 passim & 38

It is clear from the letters that Bishop Wood had big plans for this group of 5 English and one Irish Sisters: he hoped that they would soon be conducting a school in Philadelphia itself, in spite of the fact that they were destined for the small rural town of Towanda where there was a property awaiting them. He seemed to blow hot and cold about their going to Towanda. As he also enjoyed teasing them they were at times at a loss to know what he really meant and how he viewed their relationship to him as the Bishop. On the whole, Bishops preferred diocesan orders where the bishop had a canonical role as their ultimate superior. Cornelia had deliberately opted for pontifical status with the protection this gave against the whims of individual bishops.

Writing from the *Scotia* on August 7th, a letter completed the next day, M M Xavier told how "Dr Wood is very patronizing & kind but I don't quite know what he meant by saying to Sr L Ig: [*Lucy Ignatia*] in speaking of the Sisters of the Christian retreat he said they belonged to the Diocese they were like us, the Bishop was their Superior, Str L Ig: stared at him & he burst out laughing & said no more - trust him for keeping up his episcopal authority -Friday afternoonthe Bishop made me be a heretic & eat meat - He came as usual to chat with us on deck this morning, & brought us some pocket handkerchiefs to hem, & mark for him, got Str Aloysia to mend his gloves, & plagued her beyond everything until she had put in every stitch to his taste - he is full of merriment, but nothing escapes him except our observations of him - I don't fancy he suspects that whilst he is forming his opinions we are doing the same -"

And at the end of the letter, as they were approaching New York, she sums up her thoughts about their new Bishop as follows: "Dr Wood is on the whole very fatherly but he wont give his opinions plainly if we show ourselves willing to stay in Philadelphia he seems to think that, if we propose going to Towanda then he does not wish us to hurry from Ph --- but thanks to the Lord we have enough of brains amongst us to be a tolerably fair match for him - but it has been rather trying sometimes when weak etc with sea life to strain oneself to be equal to him when in his tantalizing moods, he has made out where we all come from, & considering his own origin I think he is pretty well satisfied to find two of us [*herself and Lucy Ignatia*] from Lancashire -"

Philadelphia: culture shock D 30, p 48

Bishop Wood had found very temporary accommodation for the group in three successive convents in 5 days since they arrived in Philadelphia, in sweltering heat, late on 12 August. M Xavier, with Lancastrian bluntness, tells Cornelia of their shock at what they had seen and experienced in these convents and their schools.

"....The community we are now staying with is the third we have been introduced to since our arrival in America, oh Reverend Mother if anyone wants an increase of devotion & love to our Society let them see other religious as we have done, it seems to me I could never have been a religious if our Society had not been instituted - the extraordinary want of education, of mind, of independence of priestly government, oh dreadful! a Bishop or priest lord & master of the house!! - we can never never be sufficiently grateful for our training, of course we must not judge but in some cases the apparent want of religious spirit is to us startling, & in others the over subdued looks would make me wretched - Now will you be surprised when I tell you, that I am quite anxious for all of us to get out of here for the sake of one of the sisters in the house who has asked me to receive her into our Society & she would immediately leave her own if I would do so - Of course I told her never to think of such a thing, but I am most uncomfortable to be the cause of such a temptation to her.."

stupid. Girls, boys, babies, all had a place in her heart. We had a gallery. 'Babies on the gallery were naughty,' she would say smiling.

Mother's great pleasure was the treat! Three times each week, not the whole year through, but it went on for a long time, Mother Agatha told us a story before the afternoon class.

Some of us kept a fast! - no dinner, in order to get a good place on the floor! No chairs - and the story teller was fascinating. We were like mice. I've forgotten all, nearly all, but our love for her. We believed every word of her tales, which I cannot now remember even by name, except one - 'Pork pies and Sausages.' ... The boys of the school were devoted to her.. To prove this devotion several of the boys carried stones, good sized, and placed them near each other - carried them a good quarter of a mile - so muddy, so dirty and so wet the road! - stepping stones for the sisters when they walked to Mass!"

As a Holy Child sister I found this well documented story inspiring, sometimes embarrassing when their prejudices showed through, and above all a tribute to the training they had received to be strong women and educators with loving hearts. As an archivist and historian I cannot but wonder if the transience of so much electronic communication now will not impoverish the sources which preserve the past for the service of the future.