

Sister Mary Francis Creedon

(Excerpt from the book *Standing on Their Shoulders*, written by Charlotte Fitzpatrick, rsm 2013, Flanker Press.)

Marianne Creedon was the daughter of Ellen and John Creedon of Coolowen, County Cork. She was born in 1811, and according to the register of St. Mary's Church in Cork, was baptized on December 5, 1811. Marianne's father died in the summer of 1817, when she was not quite six years old. In 1822 her older sister, Ellen married John Valentine Nugent of Waterford. There is an indication that Marianne might have lived with her sister's family in Waterford for some time, as the baptismal records of St. Patrick's Parish and the Cathedral Parish in that city name her as sponsor for three of the Nugent children.

In May of 1833, at the invitation of Bishop Fleming, the Nugents moved to St. John's, Newfoundland, where John Valentine opened a private school for young Catholic men. Marianne Creedon, along with John Valentine's ailing mother and his sister Maria, moved with the Nugent family. *The Public Ledger* of June 14, 1833 advertised the opening of the "Academy for young gentlemen." The same issue of the newspaper notified the public of another school opening, stating that John Valentine's wife, Ellen and his sister, Maria, would also "be ready to receive young ladies at their school at Mrs. Little's, Water Street." The newspaper further noted that music would be taught in that school by Miss Nugent and Miss Creedon. In addition to teaching music, Marianne helped support the family by taking care of the Nugent children.

Bishop Fleming was a frequent visitor in the Nugent household and it is likely that his concern about the deep gaps in Catholic education and the plight of the sick poor of St. John's were recurring topics of conversation during his visits. The zealous bishop was determined to find a community of nuns who would be able to respond to these desperate needs of his people in *Talamh an Eisc*, the "Land of the Fish." Having heard of the great work being done by the newly-established Order of Mercy in Ireland and learning that they were not bound by the law of enclosure, he saw these sisters as ideally suited to meet the needs of the people of St. John's. Marianne's conversations with the bishop and the Nugents as well as her own experience of living in St. John's likely stirred in her a deep compassion for the people of her adopted homeland and a desire to help them in their need. Sensing in this young woman the call to serve the poor and the outcast, Bishop Fleming lost no time in making the necessary arrangements with

Mother Catherine McAuley to admit Marianne to her new community in Dublin and to prepare her to establish a convent of the Order of Mercy in Newfoundland.

In the summer of 1839 Marianne left St. John's for Dublin, entering the Mercy community at Baggot Street on July 4. She received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the name, Sister Mary Francis, at her reception into the novitiate on February 27, 1840. In the novitiate with her was Bishop Fleming's niece, Sister Mary Justina, who had been received as a novice in July of 1839. Sister Mary Rose Lynch, who would later be part of the Newfoundland foundation, was also in the novitiate with Sister Mary Francis for most of 1840.

With Catherine McAuley as her superior and Sister Cecilia Marmion as her novice mistress, Sister Mary Francis learned the ideals and way of life of a Sister of Mercy at the fountainhead of Mercy. She made profession of vows on August 19, 1841, becoming the fiftieth member of the community.



Though the newly-professed Sister M. Francis was ready and eager to begin her mission in Newfoundland, foundation plans were delayed because of Catherine McAuley's illness. However, even this delay was providential, for not only was Sister Mary Francis living at Baggot Street during Catherine's last illness, but she was also present at her deathbed and is one of the sisters named in the codicil of Catherine's will. According to Catherine Killer by, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne's

biographer, all the sisters named in the codicil, i.e. those belonging to the Baggot Street community or currently living in that community, were regarded as being charged with the preservation of the Order's charism. Having had direct contact with Catherine McAuley and knowing her intent in founding the Order, they were given the responsibility of carrying out the works of Mercy according to her spirit and example. This was an awesome trust, which Sister Mary Francis took to heart and which gave her a sense of purpose and direction for the rest of her life.

It would be nine months from the time of her profession before Sister Mary Francis and two others from the Baggot Street community, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne and Sister Mary Rose Lynch, would leave Ireland for Newfoundland. In those months, Francis remained steadfast, learning the ways of Mercy and continuing the ministry of visiting the sick and poor of Dublin. In *The Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, Ch. 4) Sister Mary Austin Carroll sets forth the recollections of a sister who lived with Sister M. Francis at Baggot Street:

Her tender piety and her large-hearted friendship which was a blessing and support to those who enjoyed it, her beautiful simplicity and thorough unselfishness, caused her to be loved and revered.

Sister Mary Philomena McGuire, another of Sister M. Francis' contemporaries who later became superior of the Convent of Mercy in Belfast, is recorded in the *Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, Ch.4) as saying the following:

She was a most exemplary religious ... full of zeal, which made me glad to visit the sick and perform other duties with her.

In chapter 4, page 21, of the same volume, Sister Carroll describes Sister Mary Francis as "gifted with rare qualities of soul and thorough unselfishness ... especially distinguished for the amiable courtesy of her manners and her mental culture." She further states that Sister M. Francis was "deeply loved by the distinguished women who were her contemporaries in the novitiate and to whom she was deeply attached." Such recollections from those who lived and worked with Sister Mary Francis give us a glimpse of a very generous, zealous, and sensitive woman, gifted with the qualities of personality and spirit that fitted her admirably for the challenge of forging the beginnings of Mercy life and ministry in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Francis and her two companions, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne and Sister Mary Rose Lynch arrived in St. John's on *The Sir Walter Scott* on June 3, 1842 after a month at sea.

Francis would have with family and firsthand some of the community would isolation and the from all that was disease that would constant fear of



Although Sister Mary the joy of being reunited friends, she also knew difficulties the new have to face – the loneliness of separation familiar, the poverty and surround them, the contagion, the rigors of

the Newfoundland climate, as well as the precariousness of their financial situation. But not even she could have foreseen some of the obstacles, tensions and sufferings that would be part of the new mission and that would test the very foundations of her call and of the mission of Mercy, to which she had committed her life.

Throughout 1842, visitation of the sick and the poor in St. John's brought Sister M. Francis and her companions to an ever-deepening awareness of the wretched conditions under which many had to live, conditions which all too often bred a variety of diseases and epidemics. At the time of the sisters' arrival, St. John's had a large transient population, composed mainly of fishermen from Europe, whose boats were often overcrowded and unsanitary, thus bringing into the port deadly diseases that spread quickly among the people. In a letter held in the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's, dated June 24, 1842, Bishop Fleming wrote about St. John's, describing the fishing huts perched upon the rocks, the stages and fish flakes, noting that the Sisters of Mercy who, not improbably, were filled with the thought that, amid scenes such as these, and amongst the poor who dwelt thus in positions the very approach to which, particularly in winter, was pregnant with danger, their future destinies were cast.

In the early months of 1843, the sisters, now four in number following the entrance of Maria Nugent, were heavily involved in preparations for beginning school. Even after Our Lady of Mercy School opened its doors on May 1, 1843, Sister M. Francis and her sisters continued their visitation, bringing comfort and assistance to the poor and sick of St. John's.

Meanwhile the community situation was deteriorating, and Sister Mary Francis found herself in the middle of conflict and tension, much of which seems to have stemmed from Bishop Fleming's insistence on deferring to her, instead of to the named superior. The Fall of 1843 must have been a difficult time for the struggling community, as Sisters M. Ursula and M. Rose firmed up plans for returning to Ireland. With their departure on November 18, 1843, Sisters Mary Francis and Mary Joseph were left to carry out the arduous work of a very fragile and demanding mission. *The Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, p.22) reports that Sister Mary Francis' former novitiate companions, notably Mother Agnes O'Connor of New York, repeatedly urged her to abandon the Newfoundland mission. Even Bishop Fleming was dubious about the mission's survival, and sought advice about the possibility of Sister Mary Francis joining the now well-established Presentation Sisters. But Sister Mary Francis held fast, undaunted by what might be considered an utter failure, and with her one companion, resolutely carried on the works of Mercy.

It is hard to imagine what Sister Mary Francis must have thought and felt, as she lived through and pondered on what had transpired since June of 1842. She and Sister Mary Joseph must have queried among themselves what God was doing, where God was leading them, what was to happen to the mission, what would happen to them. The ultimate blow came in June of 1847 when Sister M. Joseph, Francis' dear companion and friend, was stricken with typhus and died of the disease within a few short days.

Sister M. Francis was now the only Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. In some of her more sombre moments, what she had prepared for, longed for, worked for must have seemed to her to have come to naught. Nevertheless, she soldiered on alone for ten long months, teaching, visiting the sick and the poor as she had done from the beginning. The experience of these months must have drawn on all the faith, courage and trust that Sister Mary Francis carried within her heart and soul. Undoubtedly she had her fears and her questions, but the urgency of the mission and her conviction of the action of God in her life impelled her onward, keeping her strong, pliable, available and hopeful.

Light broke through in April 1848 when her young niece, Agnes Nugent, asked to become a member of the community. Agnes entered the novitiate on December 8, 1848, receiving the name, Sister Mary Vincent. The Mercy community in

Newfoundland again numbered two, but it was not until the Fall of 1850 that the tide began to turn. On September 8, 1850, the day that Sister Mary Vincent made profession of vows, a young woman from Limerick, Mary Catherine Bernard was accepted as a postulant. Three weeks later a young widow, Mary O'Regan Redmond, who was Irish-born but living in St. John's, joined the community at Mercy Convent.

Teaching and administering the school, attending to the poor who came for help, visiting the sick and instructing the new members kept Sister Mary Francis busy, but the presence, the talents, the enthusiasm and dedication of the younger women assuredly alleviated her burdens and gave her new hope and energy.

By 1852 despite the small numbers and few resources, Sister Mary Francis and her sisters were already planning for another ministry. She had long recognized the plight of girls who had lost parents in one or other of the many epidemics that ravaged St. John's. With funds left to the sisters by Bishop Fleming, her friend and mentor who had died in 1850, construction of a girls' orphanage at the rear of Mercy Convent began in 1852, and on December 8, 1854, Immaculate Conception Orphanage was formally opened. This was very timely, because of the cholera epidemic that swept through St. John's in the Fall of that year, claiming over five hundred lives and leaving more children homeless and destitute.

But the opening of the orphanage was not the only reason for Sister Mary Francis to celebrate on December 8, 1854, for on that day, the Mercy community on Military Road welcomed its first Newfoundlander, a young woman by the name of Anastasia Tarahan. A new chapter of the story of Mercy in Newfoundland was opening up, one of renewed hope and the promise of new life.

By the spring of 1855, the hard work of caring for victims of the various plagues, the many demands of school, visitation and orphanage, as well as the struggles and hardships of the early years of the mission began to take its toll on Sister M. Francis. In that year, she and her sisters had undertaken yet another project, constructing an infirmary at Mercy Convent to care for the sick children from the orphanage. In the summer of 1855, Sister Mary Francis was showing the effects of her many onerous responsibilities and the hard work of a mission still in its youth. Though she very ill at Anastasia Tarahan's reception ceremony on July 2, 1855, she was available to receive Anastasia into the novitiate, giving her the

name, Sister Mary John Baptist. Later that same day, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Elizabeth Redmond responded to a call to visit the home of a dying person in the town. This was Sister Mary Francis' last visitation, and after returning home, she was confined to bed, dying two weeks later on July 15. At the time of her death, Sister Mary Francis Creedon was in her forty-fourth year and had been professed as a Sister of Mercy for nearly fourteen years, thirteen of which she had given totally to her beloved Newfoundland mission.

A notation in Bishop Mullock's diary on July 15, 1855, reads as follows:

Mrs. Creedon, Superioress of the Convent of Mercy, died this morning, a victim of overwork for the poor and sick.

A few days later on July 19, 1855, this simple obituary notice appeared in *The Newfoundlander*:

Died: On Sunday A.M., the 15th, Mrs. Mary Francis, Superior of the Order of Mercy, daughter of the late John Creedon, Esq. of Mount Desert of King Street, Cork, in 44th year of her age and 16th of her religious life.



Sister Mary Francis died as she had lived – quietly, without fanfare, faithfully responding to God's calls, wherever and however they came to her. She was the first to be buried in the sisters' plot in Belvedere cemetery, which had been recently opened and blessed.

With the death of Sister Mary Francis, four young sisters, one of them a novice, were left to carry on the mission in Newfoundland - a seemingly impossible task. But these women had learned the ways of Mercy from one who had come to understand deeply what Mercy was all about – compassion, commitment, hope, courage, fidelity and a deep-rooted trust in a provident and merciful God. Sister Mary Francis' teaching, her example and the zeal for mission she had engendered in them would inspire, guide and strengthen them in the difficult days and months ahead.

Sister Mary Francis Creedon, the steadfast woman of Mercy, had given her whole life to the Newfoundland mission, tending and keeping alive the spark of Mercy, when everything she had believed in and worked for seemed to be turning to ashes. Hers was a noble, resolute spirit who kept faith when all seemed lost. Sister Mary Francis' spirit of Mercy still lives in the congregation she founded, continually calling its members to trust in God's providential care, to renewed hope and to whole-hearted commitment to the mission of Mercy.

In 1981, the city council of St. John's named one of its new streets in the west end of the city, Creedon Street, after Sister Mary Francis, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.