

BOOK REVIEW

By Mary Lyons, RSM

***Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and her Companions* by Anne M. Harrington** (Dubuque, Iowa: Mount Carmel Press, Dubuque, Iowa, 2004) Pp. xv + 198

The words of Chapter 44 of the Book of Ecclesiasticus - “Let us praise illustrious [women], our ancestors in their successive generations ... whose good works have not been forgotten and whose names live on for all generations” – fittingly describe the subjects of this book, Mary Frances Clarke and her companions. The author has drawn on the rich sources of oral tradition and archival material to present this extraordinary foundress and the spirit that moved her to found a religious congregation. Like her contemporaries, Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley, and Mary Aikenhead, Mary Frances Clarke focused her energy primarily on the education of women, but she also directed her efforts wherever there was need.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, consisting of six chapters, charts the beginnings of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Dublin, Ireland, in November 1833 and their long and hazardous journey to the USA, where they continued to expand at a phenomenal rate, pursuing their ministry of education through schools for girls. At the same time Mary Frances had to address the serious matter of having the new congregation approved ecclesiastically approved. Chapter 1 describes the political context against which yet another great founding story is played out. Relying on sketchy accounts of these early days, the author describes how Mary Frances Clarke and her four companions came together through a preparatory meeting for membership of the Franciscan Tertiaries. Later, the four moved into a rented cottage and lived in community, praying together, performing charitable works, and later taking up teaching. Aware that the Sisters of Charity, Presentation Sisters, Loreto and Mercy sisters had already been established in Dublin, Mary Frances and her companions accepted an invitation and set their sights on establishing a mission in the USA.

Chapter 2 chronicles the official founding of the congregation on 11 November 1833, and the trials and tribulations these women encountered as they struggled to establish themselves. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary were founded as an association dedicated to the education of women, but without canonical status. Confusion concerning their status arose because of conflict between the local bishop and the priest who had invited them and also because at this time the juridical nature of pontifical and diocesan congregations was less clearly defined than it is today. Despite prevailing discrimination, new members joined the fledgling congregation, with Terence James Donaghoe as their mentor and religious superior. He wrote their first “Rule”, drew up a simple schedule, and approved a habit for the sisters. Despite the hostile environment of Philadelphia and no canonical status, the association expanded.

In Chapter 3, we see how these women, pioneers in the truest sense of the word, were not content with settling in one place. Like Abraham, they heard again God’s call as moved by profound religious experiences and insight into the needs of their time, they set out to establish themselves in new and challenging pastures. In the midst of financial woes, scandal,

and discrimination, they had the joy of being canonically approved as a diocesan congregation on 15 August 1845, taking vows for one year. In the 1880s the “Rule” originally written by Donaghoe, and revised by Mary Frances, received final approbation by the Holy See and in 1900 the sisters were allowed to take perpetual vows. All these steps towards full canonical approval strengthened the sisters’ resolve and confirmed them in their determination to confront the most demanding circumstances.

Chapter 4 deals with the expansion of the congregation and the development of its ministry. Here we also get interesting glimpses into the life of Mary Frances Clarke as she guides and encourages her sisters amidst the difficulties they encountered. Chapter 5 deals with the approval of the “Rule”, with death, and the inevitable financial problems that beset any new enterprise. Chapter 6 of Part I goes into some interesting detail on the financial difficulties and expenses incurred. It concludes with the death of Mary Frances Clarke on 4 December 1887.

Part II, consisting of four chapters, deals with the founding spirit and spirituality of the new congregation; its development after the death of the foundress; the heritage she bequeathed to them; and then the agony and the ecstasy of their wholehearted and generous response to the call for renewal and adaptation from the Second Vatican Council. Chapter 7 examines the various influences that shaped the spirituality of Mary Frances Clarke. She and her companions would have drawn on their Franciscan Tertian experience, the Quaker tradition, the Celtic tradition, and devotion to Saint Joseph, and from these they developed a spirituality that was life-giving and grounded in reality.

Chapter 8 deals with financial and personnel problems as well as difficulties with the hierarchy. Governmental changes in the structure of the congregation and the building of new schools are dealt with in Chapter 9. The Second Vatican Council’s call for renewal and adaptation met with enthusiasm in this as in all congregations. Education of the sisters became a priority. The issue of Civil Rights became a mission. Ministry to the poor, the marginalised, youth, and older members of society became part of the congregation’s mission. The religious habit was adapted to suit the needs of place and ministry. Governance structures underwent radical changes. Regions replaced provinces, with the emphasis now on shared responsibility. The Constitutions were rewritten to reflect the new way of life, but still reflected the vision, courage, insight, and pioneering spirit of Mary Frances Clarke as she and her companions responded to the authentic needs of society and the education of women in nineteenth century Ireland, the United States of America, and further afield.

This is a wonderful encapsulation of the life and times of a great and humble foundress. It reflects the challenges encountered by so many nineteenth century foundresses and it will resonate particularly with congregations like the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters. Despite the paucity of recorded material on the early days of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ann M Harrington must be commended for having done meticulous research and produced a relevant and well-documented biography of her foundress, complete with Glossary, Notes, Bibliography, and Index, that will be a valuable resource and inspiration for her own congregation, and also for students of consecrated life and the history of the Church.