

A Century of Prayer in Carlow

Introduction

Our story begins with the story of Saint Francis and Saint Clare. It is impossible to tell the story of one without the other, for in the Providence of God these two are inseparably intertwined. The tiny seed sown in thirteenth century Assisi rooted itself firmly in the Church and thrust our vigorous shoots to become the great tree of the Franciscan family, spread far and wide through time and space, flourishing still at the end of twentieth century.

It was a seed of divine origin - Francis is quite clear: "And after the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel". (Testament of St. Francis). And Clare, who loved to refer to herself as "the little plant of the blessed Father Francis", writes in her Testament. "The Lord gave us our most Blessed Father Francis as founder, planter and helper in the service of Christ and in those things we have promised to God and himself".

Who were these two saints who have influenced so greatly the life of the Church and the history of Christian spirituality through the ages? They grew up in the same Italian town of Assisi towards the end of the twelfth century - Francis, the son of Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant, and Clare, eldest daughter of the noble and wealthy Offreduccio family. Clare was ten or eleven years younger than Francis, and because the merchant class was fighting against the nobles, neither of them would have known



each other in their early years. When Francis grew to young manhood he went off to war against neighbouring Perugia, hoping to win knightly glory - but the Lord made him realise that he was calling him to His service instead. So Francis returned to Assisi to spend some years in searching, struggle and indecision before he finally became aware of God's to preach the Gospel of peace and forgiveness to all. He gave up everything, dressed in a poor garment and barefooted walked the streets and countryside, speaking in simple and glowing words the message of the Gospel that burned within him. Soon he was joined by other men from all walks of life. They worked with the local labourers for the food they ate and when that was not enough they begged their bread from door to door. At first, people thought them mad, then they began to admire them when they saw how they reacted to derision and mockery, really living the message of the Gospel and giving away all their worldly goods to the poor, and finally, Francis was regarded as a saint, the founder of a new religious family in the Church, and his followers were respected and loved by all.

Clare, meanwhile, had grown into a beautiful young girl, not only in outward appearance but also in true spiritual goodness, deeply prayerful and concerned about the plight of the poor in her native town, with whom she frequently shared her own rich food.



At. Eighteen, she was being urged by her parents to enter into a suitable marriage: but having heard Francis preach in the Cathedral she realised that she, too, was being called by God to a life of poverty and prayer. Accompanied by a trusted relative, Clare spoke to Francis in secret about her vocation several times. She realised that her family would never agree to her joining this new Order so totally removed from the society in which she had been brought up. So on the night

following Palm Sunday 1212 she left her father's house with her companion and was received by Francis and his friars in the little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels in the woods.

There her long golden hair was cut off and she put on the simple, rough robe of the Franciscan habit, tied around the waist with a cord, and a black veil over her shorn head to show that she was henceforth consecrated to God forever. The friars then escorted Clare her companion to a nearby Benedictine monastery until Francis had a place ready to be lived in. Her family members were furious, but no amount of threats could persuade her to return. Only a fortnight afterwards she was joined by her younger sister, Catherine, who would henceforth be called Agnes in religion. This time the fury of the family knew no bounds and they attempted to take Agnes by force from the monastery, but by the intervention of God they were unable to succeed and the two sisters, united even more strongly now by the double bond of both blood and religion, settled into the place Francis had repaired to be their future home - the little monastery attached to the old church of San Damiano. Here, while rebuilding the walls of the broken down church in response to the voice which spoke to him from the huge crucifix still hanging on the crumbling walls:



The Crucifix which spoke to St. Francis

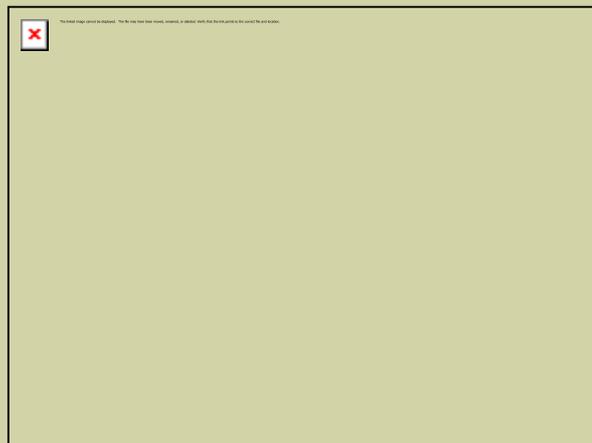
"Francis, rebuild My Church which, as you see, is falling into ruin", he was filled with great joy and the light of the Holy Spirit, calling out loudly in French to the inhabitants living by in prophetic words: "Come and help me in the work of building this monastery of San Damiano! Ladies will one day live here who by the fame of their holy life will glorify the heavenly Father throughout the entire Church!" The voice of the Crucified One, with the eyes of immense tenderness and gentleness, had penetrated to the very depths of Francis' being and engraved the marks of His suffering and the reality of His infinite love upon his inmost soul long before the sacred Stigmata appeared in visible form on Francis' hands and feet and side. Clare was filled with wonder and gratitude to the heavenly Father for having chosen and called her, with the sisters who began to join her in San Damiano, to build up the

Church by a life of loving contemplation of the Poor Crucified, poor, lying in the manger; naked on the cross and poor in His lowly Sacrament of the Eucharist. In this holy place, cradle of the Poor Clare Order, Clare lived enclosed for the next forty-two years until her blessed death on August 11th 1253, in her sixtieth year, dying with praise and thanksgiving to God for having given her the great gift of Life: "O Lord, may You who have created me, be blessed!"

When Francis died in 1226, revered as a great saint, he was canonized only two years later. Likewise Clare, the living embodiment of his spirit and ideals, was canonized just two years after her holy death in 1253. These two great Saints have given to the church the three-fold Franciscan family, the Friars preaching the Gospel, the Poor Clare's praying for the needs of the world and praising God for all those who neglect this duty of grateful love, and the Secular Franciscans, ordinary men and women, married and single, who want to live their daily lives in the spirit of Francis and Clare.

SAINT COLETTE

Many of the Poor Clare monasteries all over the world are called 'Colettine Poor Clare's', like our own monastery in Graiguecullen. This is because they have sprung from communities either reformed in the fifteenth century by Saint Colette, or newly founded by her. Colette, or newly founded by her. Colette of Corbie in France was born into a Church torn asunder by the Hundred Years' War and the Great Schism. Many of the Poor Clare monasteries then existing needed to be reformed in order to live the primitive ideal of Francis and Clare, and this is the work which Colette was called by God to do. She had been living as a recluse from the age of twenty in the shadow of the church in her native city, but now, after the will of God had been made clear to her in several visions, she spent herself tirelessly travelling through Europe, solidly re-establishing St. Clare's Rule by writing constitutions or commentaries of her own which were to be upheld without any basic modifications for five centuries.



San Damiano

These strongly emphasised personal and communal poverty and a simple and austere lifestyle in sisterhood. St. Colette was canonized in 1807. "In our age, it is necessary and important for the life of the Church to repeat the discovery of Saint Clare; it is vital to rediscover that charisma, that vocation. It is necessary to rediscover the divine legend of Francis and Clare."

CHAPTER 1

ROOTS

When two Poor Clare nuns landed at Drogheda in the early hours of April 26th, 1893, en route for Graiguecullen, Carlow, to establish the Rule of St. Clare with the Constitution of St. Colette in a new foundation in Ireland they were not the first to be inspired by this generous ideal. Two and a half centuries earlier a heroic band of seven Irish nuns arrived from Flanders to sow the seed of Poor Clare contemplative life in their native country. Fr. Celsus O'Brien, OFM ., tells the inspiring story of these courageous and saintly forbearers of our Galway Poor Clare Sisters in his commemorative booklet for their 350th anniversary in 1992 - a story of persecution, suppression, hardship and banishment during Penal days. It was impossible to live the Rule of St. Clare in all its strictness in the ensuing years, until the full Colettine observances was once again resumed in Nuns' Island, Galway, in 1892, thanks to the generous fidelity and heroic perseverance of our persecuted Irish Poor Clare sisters. During the intervening centuries the radiance of St. Clare continued to attract many Irish girls to enter monasteries on the continent, adding voluntary exile from their beloved native land to the austerities of the Rule.

One such monastery was the Poor Clare Colettine community in Bruges, (Belgium), founded in 1479 from Ghent (Belgium) which, in turn, had been established in 1442 by St. Colette herself, the great reformer of the Poor Clare's two centuries after St. Clare's death. The Bruges chronicle reads like a copy of our own Irish history - suppression, persecution, exile - until in 1830 a remarkable Belgian woman, Mother Dominique Berlamont, was chosen as Abbess of the Bruges community and was the instrument destined by God to restore the strict observance of the Poor Clare Colettine rule, not only in her own monastery but throughout Belgium and even in England by several foundations. One of these was in Levenshulme, Manchester (1863) and it was to this community that Mary Bowe, eldest daughter of Thomas and Ellen Bowe, Tullaroan, Kilkenny, came in 1871 at the age of twenty-five to fulfil her ardent longing of following in the footsteps of St. Clare by observing her Rule in its entirety.

Undoubtedly it was the Franciscan influence in Kilkenny which had turned her thoughts in this direction. The old St. Francis Abbey was founded as early as 1234, only eight years after the death of St. Francis, and all through the penal times the Capuchin sons of St. Francis carried on the spirit of their holy Founder, managing to exist through persecution, suppression and hiding, to the great consolation of the people. Coming from a fervent Catholic background Mary Bowe had learnt to love

and admire St. Francis and his clear and literal interpretation of the Gospel. And, as in the case of St. Clare herself, her own sister also entered the Levenshulme community but died young. A younger brother, Edward, was to become the much esteemed Fr. Peter Bowe of the Capuchin community in Kilkenny, several times holding the offices of Guardian, Definitor and Provincial. He was, of course, a great source of support and encouragement to his sister when, as Mother Seraphim, her heart's desire of returning to Ireland was fulfilled.

GREAT SACRIFIC

She confessed later to one of the Sisters that leaving Ireland was the greatest sacrifice she had made and that she never would have done so if there had been a monastery of the primitive Rule of St. Clare in her native country. As we have seen, our Galway sisters would not resume the full observance of the Rule for another twenty years, so she had no alternative. A section of the original Irish Poor Clare's had decided during the troubled penal times to take on teaching and the care of orphans as their apostolate and so had been dispensed from the fast and enclosure of the Rule. But this active apostolate held no attraction for Mother Seraphim even though in her day it was extremely necessary and praiseworthy. It was simply that the call of God had come to her so strongly as a call to a life of prayer, of praise, of penance and intercession on behalf of all those poor, suffering, sinful, abandoned ones in the world around her that she was unable to resist it. It was, in other words, a call to a life of pure faith, for the contemplative life is above all a life of faith. And prayer is the language of faith. All of Scripture teaches this truth. In the Gospel, above all, Our Lord impresses upon us the absolute necessity "to pray continually and never lose heart". (Luke 18:1). He says again: "The harvest is great; the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest". (Matt 9:37). If the harvest is so great - as indeed it is - would not the natural conclusion be that everyone possible should go and work overtime? But no, God answers, speaking through the prophet Isaiah (55:8) "My thoughts and not your thoughts, my ways not your ways". Because the labourers are few, prayer, not work, is the means to be employed. Then the Master will call whoever He wills to work in the busy harvest fields of the world while the contemplative orders are the lighthouse, so to speak, which bring a comforting ray of encouragement and hope in the darkness and storms of life.

GOD'S VIEWPOINT

Faith, then, is all-important in the life of the spirit. It is the ability to see everything from God's viewpoint, the one great force by which the devil can be resisted. Scripture spells it out for us in 1 Peter 5:8-9: "Be calm but vigilant, because your enemy, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to eat. Stand up to him, strong in faith ... "The devil is aware of this. The ruin of individuals and of nations starts with undermining their faith. After that, when their hold on the eternal realities is weakened or broken, they have no support on the stormy seas of passion and will be sucked into the black depths of eternal despair. A life of prayer, on the other hand, is a perpetual recognition of God's existence, of his All Goodness, an acknowledgement of our dependence, our trust,

our need of Him. All are not called to the same degree of faith and prayer, of course. It is pure gift, grace. Deep faith calls for deep prayer and it is to a life of such faith and prayer that the contemplative is drawn.

"OBSERVE THE HOLY GOSPEL"

This was the vocation of St. Clare, when as a wealthy and beautiful eighteen-year-old she chose "to observe the holy Gospel" literally and under the guidance of St. Francis to live enclosed in the little monastery of San Damiano in Assisi until her death forty-two years later, without revenue of any kind, utterly dependent on the Father of Mercies as she loved to call her God, receiving everything, whether the fruit of their labour or freely donated, as a special sign of God's bountiful goodness and care, and sharing her gifts of grace and nature with all who came in their need to the monastery. Clare, indeed, was a light in her world - her very means 'clear shining'. This was taken up by the Pope when he canonized her only two years after her death in 1253:

"Clare shone forth in life; she is radiant after death. Place in the confined area of the monastery, yet her light was spread throughout the whole world ... "

Nor has it ceased to shine during the eight centuries that have passed since her birth in 1193/4. It was this shining light which drew Mother Seraphim irresistibly to follow in St. Clare's path of contemplative living, poor in fact and in spirit but joyfully secure because at every moment of her religious life she could confidently say:

"I know is whom I have believed". (2Tim. 1:12) - "I believe in God, the Father Almighty". (Creed).

CHAPTER 2

BEGINNINGS

Through the centuries St. Clare's ideal of Gospel living had attracted many Irish girls and when Mary Bowe entered the Poor Clare community in Levenshulme, most of them were Irish. Naturally, the thought of making a foundation in their native land was a constant subject of prayer amongst them, as Mother Seraphim herself relates in her chronicle. But the Mother abbess at this time was a Belgian and had no wish for a foundation in Ireland, partly because she thought the country too poor to support them and partly because she feared that if she did make a foundation there, the Sisters would be forced to give up their privilege of complete poverty and accept an active apostolate as had happened earlier. Living on alms, without security of any kind, was one of the points of St. Clare's Rule that was most dear to her and is the outstanding characteristic of St. Clare's following of the Poor Crucified One, totally surrendered in unwavering trust to the Providence of the Father of Mercies.

MOTHER SERAPHINE CHOSEN

The years passed and when the good Abbess died in 1889, one of the Irish sisters, Mother Bonaventure, was elected Abbess in her place. Now, at last, God's time seemed to have come for their dream to come true. Mother Bonaventure had a wealthy merchant cousin in Drogheda who offered to build a convent if she could send the Sisters to make the foundation. But a new difficulty now presented itself. It seemed impossible to find an Irish Bishop willing to accept them into his diocese. They feared that a community of nuns living totally on alms could not possibly exist in a country as poor as Ireland was at the end of the nineteenth century. It took some years of earnest prayer to find a Bishop who was not only willing but even glad to have a Poor Clare community in his diocese. He was Most Reverend Dr. Lynch, Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin, then residing in Tullow. Mother Seraphim, who had been chosen to lead the new foundation, with a companion sister travelled over to Ireland to see the proposed premises. They were most warmly welcomed by the Parish Priest of Graiguecullen, Very Rev. Dan Byrne, who enthusiastically showed them the house beside the old parish church (now St. Fiacc's Parish Hall) formerly a presbytery but now occupied by an old couple not long in residence there. He felt this would be a suitable building for a convent and had the advantage of being close to the church where the nuns would have to attend Mass on Sundays until their proper enclosure was established after some time. He was confident that the owners would part with the house for a reasonable price and so the two pioneers returned to their Levenshulme monastery to make final preparations for the foundation.

Just when their dream was on the point of fulfilment, another obstacle arose which turned their joy to dismay. The Drogheda merchant withdrew his promise of building a monastery in Graiguecullen and offered instead to give the new community a large hotel he owned outside Drogheda in order to make the foundation there! This, of course, would have meant another weary wait trying to get Episcopal sanction of the Drogheda foundation - if indeed, it would ever be given. Mother Seraphim, nothing daunted, felt that 'the old enemy' was making a hard fight to keep them out of Ireland and determined to cast all her faith and trust on God. "We will go to Graiguecullen". She said "and if that man does not build the monastery God Himself will build it". She decided to go straight to Drogheda, with the Bishop's permission, and try to induce the old gentleman to revert to his former offer.

CHAPTER 3

A NEW SHOOT

Early morning of April 26th, 1893, found Mother Seraphim and her companion Mother Angela Tait (who, incidentally was a Scottish Presbyterian convert) making their way to the merchant's residence with still a glimmer of hope left. A curious picture these two must have presented, their poverty evident from their coarse brown habit and cloak and scanty luggage, the most treasured item being a small wooden grille which Mother Seraphim herself had made before they left

Levenshulme! The grille, of course, was an essential component of their enclosed life, a sign of their having chosen to live within the precincts of the monastery in order to seek intimacy with God in poverty and prayer and intercession for the needs of the world.

On arriving at the house the old housekeeper informed them that her master was in bed, too ill to see them. Mother Angela confesses at this point that she was very downhearted - and it did not help the situation when she arrived at the Franciscan Church to find that Mass was just over. But Mother Seraphim was made of stronger mettle and the very sight of her calm, unruffled appearance was enough to make her companion feel ashamed of her faint heart. Her confidence was further restored and her spirits lifted by a little old lady in cloak and mop cap who insisted on escorting the two nuns to the Augustinian Church where the feast of Our Lady of Good Counsel was being celebrated with extra Masses. Up the centre of the packed church she marched, clutching a huge black umbrella tied with string at the top, ushered them into the front pew already occupied by two prim ladies and then squeezed herself beside them to their very evident displeasure. Our two pioneers surely had need of good counsel that morning. Ever since, April 26th had been kept as a day of grateful remembrance and thanksgiving in our community.

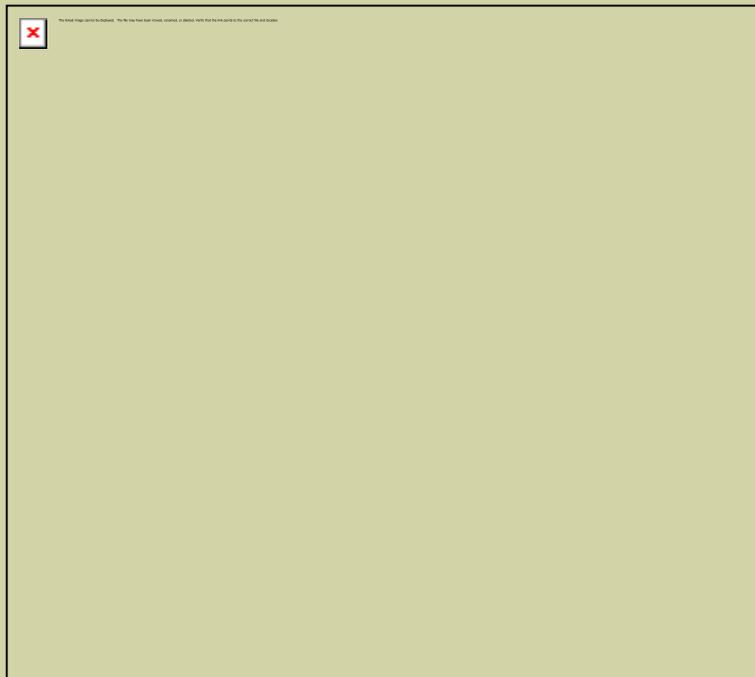
LONG JOURNEY TO CARLOW

Then spent the rest of the day and that night with the Dominican Sisters in Siena Convent, Drogheda, who welcomed them most hospitably and warmly, pressing them to stay as long as they wished. But Mother Seraphim was anxious to reach their destination as soon as possible and with considerably lightened hearts the two travellers once again took to the road on the long journey to Carlow. They wished to call to the Poor Clare convent in Balljamesduff also, as one of their own community in Levenshulme had a sister there. These Sisters belonged to the group of Poor Clare's mentioned earlier, who had taken on the teaching apostolate and so were not enclosed now. Here, Mother Seraphim and Mother Angela were also most warmly welcomed and refreshed until at last they arrived in Tullow to meet the Bishop. Their penniless condition made them apprehensive of the reception they might meet with, because the Bishop was under the impression still that the new foundation would be financed by the Drogheda merchant. But Most Reverend Dr. Lynch put them at ease immediately and could not have welcomed them more warmly, encouraging them to persevere in spite of the trials and crosses which new beginnings invariably encountered. He himself, a member of the Vincentian Order, had been among the first band of Vincentians in Ireland and had experienced great difficulties and trials before his Order took root and flourished. A true man of God, his deep faith in the power of prayer was a rock of strength to the little Poor Clare community from the very beginning. Now at their first meeting, he insisted on bringing the two pioneers to the Brigidine convent in Tullow, where, once again, they were received with open arms before they were sent off by coach on the last lap of their journey.

CHAPTER 4

PLANTING TIME

On arrival in Graiguecullen, the Parish Priest, Very Rev. Dan Byrne, with his curate, Fr. Arthur Murphy, gave Mother Seraphim and Mother Angela an enthusiastic welcome. They were most anxious to have the new foundation but had disappointing news about the house beside the old church which Mother Seraphim and seen the year before. The owners refused to sell except at an exorbitant price utterly beyond the Poor Clare's' means, so the good P.P. was forced to offer the nuns a ramshackle building, unoccupied, on the bridge between Carlow and Graiguecullen, "just for six weeks at the most", he said. He had also hoped to surprise the nuns with a legacy left to the parish for the work of a religious order - until they discovered they could not avail of a penny of it as the testator had stipulated an active order!



The disappointment about the house seemed a calamity at the time, but afterwards the community could see it as a blessing since the old church became the parish hall later on. Three other Sisters came to join the original two a week later from Levenshulme, so the five Poor Clare's set to work to make the old house somewhat habitable. It had been used only as a rough business premises or storehouse, built on a rock in the River Barrow, and although there was "water, water all around" there was "not a drop to drink". Schoolchildren had to bring the nuns cans of drinking water each day, with the river providing the rest of the water needed. The extraordinary thing was that although the River the time, but the Barrow frequently overflowed its banks (as it still does) and the entire lower area would be covered in a foot or two of water for some days at a time two or three times a year before the nuns came, from the time they began living in the house they were not flooded even once. Mother Seraphine called their old house "Rivo Torto" after the old shed where St. Francis and his first companions used to sleep until they were

driven out by a farmer with his ass - but Mother Angela wittily named it "River Torture" after she and another sister took an unplanned dip in the river one day!

At the end of the garden behind the house she was hauling up a bucket of water as usual when the plank gave away and she tumbled in. It was deep at that spot but she managed to scramble out, thoroughly frightened, losing her sandal in the process. Nobody had seen her but the first Sister she met insisted on going back to look for the sandal, in spite of her remonstrations - and tumbled in, head first herself! On the opposite bank the Protestant Minister with dome friends was taking a stroll, so a band of rescuers soon had the poor Sister on terra firma again. Therese and many memories of their pioneer days on the Bridge gave the Sisters cause for merriment and happy banter at recreation in the evenings, not the least being the boatmen whose "lungs and language were equally strong", as the chronicle reads, but who "used to doff their caps and maintain a rigorous silence while sailing past, mindful that, if their feet were not on holy ground, the keels of their boats were in what they looked upon as sacred waters". Mother Angela muses: " I suppose it was just the thought of us getting up in the middle of the night to pray for them, and the thought of the life we were leading, that touched their warm Irish hearts". She herself, the former Scottish Presbyterian, had a wonderful love for Ireland and all things Irish and with the sense of humour and deep faith and trust in God which the Sisters shared together, the seven long years on the Bridge waiting for their proper home seemed like Jacob waiting for Rachel, if not "like a few days" (Gen. 29:20), at least not unbearable nor depressing.

The Sisters had been given permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the only proper room in the house, in front, and there Fr. Murphy, the curate, offered daily Mass for them. On Sundays they had to go out to the parish church, but the priests of St. Patrick's College were exceedingly good to them and very kindly came, at great cost to themselves especially during holiday time, to offer Sunday Mass for the nuns as often as possible, knowing that they hated having to go out. Soon the location of this room for Mass and community prayer gave the Sisters some qualms, as every word from the street outside floated in through the two low windows. The chronicle continues: "all the bargains that failed at the fair got a second trial under our windows. Sometimes the men were more than top-heavy and said more than their prayers! One night at 2 a.m. there was such drunken language going on that one of the Sisters got an inspiration to ring a large hand-bell, so lifting the window she rang the bell loud and long. The bell was heard at the barracks and soon the hasty steps of the police were heard coming to the rescue!"

OLD STOREROOM

When the "six weeks" had well and truly passed and the Sisters were a year or so on the Bridge with no sign of a permanent monastery or even another location available, they decided to try and organise a more fitting place to use as a chapel. At the back of the dwelling house there was an old store-room or workshop, very dilapidated, very long and narrow, with wooden rafters laid immediately on the eight feet high walls. Laths nailed to the rafters held the slates in place - or some slates,

we should say, because many of the slates were missing with the rain coming down freely. Consequently the floor underneath was completely rotten and dangerous to walk on. The shape of the place took the nuns' fancy, with the roof going up to a point, thirteen feet. At a cost of £10 (a huge amount to the Sisters) they had the roof lined with sheeting boards nailed on to the wooden rafters. The chronicle remarks: "It looked lovely but was still very airy, so much so that we could not keep the candles lighting on the altar!



To remedy this evil, we had to paper the whole roof and re-paper it more than once a year, as being so low, the smoke from the candles had the place blackened in no time". The little community set to work as painters, joiners, carpenters and cleaners and had no lack of practice during those seven years because it needed continual repairing to keep it habitable. A rent of £20 a year had to be paid for the house, due in instalments of £10 every six months. Soon after their arrival on the Bridge a holy Jesuit priest visited them and encouraged them greatly in their extreme poverty. "You have the power of prayer in your house", he said, "you need never be afraid. Go to Our Lady for the spirituals and to St. Joseph for the temporals!"

So St. Joseph was given the task of providing the £10 within one month before it was due, as anything the nuns could scrape together between the rent months had to go to their building fund. Every day, without fail, the Thirty Days Prayer was offered in honour of St. Joseph, and each time, without fail, the £10 was ready for the rent.

CHAPTER 5

STORMY WEATHER

"love no flood can quench, no torrents drown" ... (Song of Songs 8:7)

River and rain were tackled with light heart by Mother Seraphine and her little band of four Sisters during the seven years on the Bridge - but what of the floods and torrents of another dimension they had to face? From the very outset there were those who represented to the saintly old Bishop that it was mistaken kindness to encourage the Poor Clares to remain; that they had no site and even if they had, they had no money to build a monastery; and anyway, if he wanted a religious congregation in the parish, why not get Sisters who did some "useful" work for the people? The kindly Dr. Lynch would often drive over from Tullow to encourage the nuns to keep on praying. "And if God wants you here" he would say to them, "He will

send the money and everything else that you need in His own good time". The Diocesan Council had stipulated that £2,000 must be produced by the nuns before they could even think of building, even if they had a site, so every ha'penny that could possibly be spared went towards this seemingly impossible amount.

KINDNESS & CHARITY

How did the five Sisters live during those poverty-stricken days and years? Mother Angela, in her chronicle tells: "My heart had been deeply touched from the beginning by all the kindness and charity shown us by everyone - from the dear Dominican nuns in Drogheda and our own Poor Clare Sisters in Ballyjamesduff, to the Brigidine nuns in Tullow who could not do enough for us; then, above all, by the Holy Bishop, Dr. Lynch, the P.P., Fr. Dan Byrne and his curate, Fr. Arthur Murphy, the College priests, Fr. Peter Bowe, Capuchin Provincial and the Capuchin community in Kilkenny and many others. But I think nothing impressed me so much as the faith and devotion of the people around Carlow, Graiguecullen and Killeslin. To a person like myself, who had been reared in Scotland as a strict Presbyterian, the way they seemed to understand and appreciate our hidden life of prayer and penance seemed simply wonderful to me and I loved them for it". Rich and poor alike came with their alms to the Poor Nuns, as they called the Sisters, and whether big or very little it was always given from a generous, faith-filled heart, making no account of the very real privation it often meant to themselves.

The benefactors to whom our community is most deeply indebted were Mr. and Mrs. Michael Governey. The pioneer Sisters had hardly got inside the old house on the Bridge when Mrs Governey presented herself to welcome them to Ireland, laden with a large basket of provisions of all kinds. As we shall see, it was the beginning of a wonderful generosity and devotedness to the community that will never be forgotten in St. Clare's

UNSTINTED GENEROSITY

But it was the people all around the Graiguecullen/Killeslin/Carlow area who supplied the daily wants of the community with unstinted generosity. Some of these were poor and very poor, and all were gifted with a vivid realisation of the significance and utility of a hidden life of prayer and penance and praise. Our chronicle records some touching accounts of the sacrifices made by these wonderful people, stories worthy of a place among the Fioretti of early Franciscan writings.

There was old Francis, who looked so poor the first time he came with his little alms that the Sister refused to take it. But he insisted, saying that he knew the brown habit well from the time he was soldiering in Malta, and he wanted the prayers of the Sisters. Assured that they would pray for him all the same, that did not satisfy him until she accepted his offering and he went happily away to begin his apostolate on behalf of the Poor Nuns, spreading the news everywhere he went all over the country selling small wares with his donkey and cart, that the Poor Nuns in Graigue got up in the middle of the night to pray for the world and had nothing to live on but what people gave them in charity. Many a small donation he brought back

with him to the convent, and if he thought it as bigger than usual he would ask Mother Abbess if she would give him "a bit o' writin" that he could take back to the donor next time around that way. All the time the nuns were in the old house on the Bridge he provided them with turf and coal for the winter as well as some hilarious episodes with the donkey. For instance, the time he called and asked Sister for a bit of old bread for "her", nodding at the donkey. When Sister held it out the poor animal made such a snap at it that she dropped it in fright - where upon old Francis began to scold the donkey soundly. "Where are ye'er manners? I'm ashamed of ye!" "Now lady", he said, handing the bread to Sister once again. Bravely she held it out to the poor creature and this time it took it as carefully out of her hand as if it had understood every word Francis had spoken! Nearly the last thing he did before he died was to go the new monastery that was being built and measure the width and length of one of the cloisters so that he could beg around for the price of a strip of coco matting used on the bare boards.

FRESH EGGS

There was the poor woman who made it her special care to bring the nuns a few very fresh eggs, particularly in wintertime, and when the Sister remonstrated with her bringing them when they were so scarce and dear she replied : "Musha, isn't that the time I like to bring them". Another used to call in on her way to the market and bring the nuns the first fruits of her little garden. When Sister objected, saying that they would be grateful for anything that was left in the evening, she replied: "Is it the lavins ye would have me bring ye? No indeed, ye'll have the first and the best and the rest will sell twice as quick when ye've had ye'er little bit!" Another poor man devised a scheme to make sure that the nuns would never be without bread (as happened only once in the whole time of our existence in Graiguecullen, in the very early days on the Bridge). He made a list of people who would be willing to give one loaf each week or fortnight and then arranged what day each one would send her gift so that there would be no fear of the Sisters having too much one day and not enough another day. Such was the life of the little community, living to the letter the exhortation of Scripture: "Unload all your worries on the Lord, since he is looking after you". (1Pet. 5:8); their only security being the words of the Master which will never pass away: "Set your hearts first on the kingdom of God and on His righteousness, and all other things will be given you as well". (Matt. 6:33).

All these blessed friends and so many more have surely received the kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world. We owe our very existence to them, rich and poor, to this very day; and as long as our community continues prayers of thanksgiving and intercession will rise unceasingly, day and night, on their behalf.

CHAPTER 6

STURDY GROWTH

Incredibly, in spite of the poverty, and austerity of the community, several very good postulants were seeking admission. The old Bishop gave Mother Seraphine permission to take a few, if room could be found for them, so once again the community set to work to transform the front room into a place which would be suitable. Having the oratory at the back now made this possible, and no doubt the young postulants had many a memorable interlude to lighten their first steps in Poor Clare living. When the first of these was ready to be professed, the floods and torrents always seething in the background in those early days threatened to burst upon the community. Dr. Lynch, old and still living in Tullow, had asked his Coadjutor Bishop to profess the young novice as he, himself, had to attend the funeral of a fellow-Bishop that morning. But the young Bishop refused to come, thinking that it was not right to encourage a foundation which looked so hopeless and was bound to fail. There was consternation on the Bridge - but their good friend, the curate Fr. Arthur Murphy, kindly let the old Bishop, Dr. Lynch, know the situation and he came immediately after the funeral to perform the ceremony, making the occasion as pleasant and joyful as he could to the great relief of the Sisters.

This incident highlights the precarious position of the foundation during those early years on the Bridge. "Pray, pray, pray" was Dr. Lynch's constant word to them. He was a man of prayer and he wished to let it prove itself. Mother Seraphine needed no encouragement in that area, at least. Prayer was as natural to her as breathing, and the greater the danger the more intensely she prayed, with a childlike faith and trusting confidence that were both comfort and encouragement to her little community as well as irresistible to the Lord Himself, who, as the saints tell us, inspires us to pray for those very things which He wants to give us.

Quite suddenly, in 1895, the young Coadjutor Bishop died. His opinion about the Poor Clare foundation was quite well known, so on his way back from the funeral one of the College priests called in to see the nuns and teasingly said to Mother Seraphine: "Aren't you terrible people here! You are after killing the poor young Bishop with your prayers!" She answered quite seriously in her simplicity: "Oh Father, how can you say such a thing? We would never dream of praying for the death of anyone. We only pray that if God wants us here He will remove all the obstacles". "I am glad I'm not an obstacle", was his parting word.

Money for the building was slowly but surely coming in, but here seemed no hope of any suitable site in the area. The old Parish Priest had mentioned that there was a field not far from the old church but on the other side of the road that would be ideal for a new parish church and a convent as well, but at the time it seemed an utterly impossible dream. By degrees several other people mentioned it to Mother Seraphine also, so she thought of trying to acquire even a small portion of it, asking a friend of the community to negotiate as if it were for himself. But the owner, a Quaker, refused to consider any offer, saying that his two sisters who lived with

him wanted it for a pleasure garden. However, both these sisters now died with a year and Mother Seraphine tried again through the same friend. Once more he failed, so taking one last chance she approached the owner in the name of the community. But he absolutely refused and this time stated categorically that it was against his religious principles to give ground for any religious institute except of his own creed. Very soon after this he had to go into hospital for a slight operation, and most unexpectedly the poor man died! There three deaths occurred in less than two years - so not much imagination is needed to surmise the subject of conversation between the community and their priest friend at the College the next time he visited on the Bridge!

SOLD BY AUCTION

But there was still another "obstacle" left. All the deceased Quaker's property, including this field of seven acres, was to be sold by auction. Everyone thought that another Protestant gentleman would buy the field because he had been renting it from the original owner for his horses - but when the day came, everything was disposed of very quickly except this very field, without a single bid being made for it. When the papers published the fact that it was to be sold by private treaty, Fr. Arthur Murphy, the curate of Graiguecullen and very good friend of the community went immediately to Mr. Governey and alerted him to the situation. Once the latter understood that the Poor Clares thought that this was a very suitable location for a monastery, he immediately offered to buy the whole field and give them as much as they wanted. And not only that: he also offered the ground for a new parish Church attached, if ever the money could be collected to build one. Straight away he went to the auctioneer and since there was no other bid, the field was his. The curate's joy was unbounded, but it was too late that evening to let the nuns know the wonderful news. Before he began the community Mass the following morning he asked the Sisters to unite with him in offering the Holy Sacrifice for their great benefactors, Mr and Mrs. Governey, who had just purchased the site for their new monastery and thereby secured the foundation in Griague. One can only imagine the feelings that welled up in all hearts and overflowed in grateful praise and thanks to the Father of Mercies and their most generous benefactors, who had given the two acres for monastery, garden and church rent free. "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you". (Matt. 7:7). Yet, indeed, Mother Seraphine knew in Whom she believed.

CHAPTER 7

THE CLOUDBURST

Mother Seraphine and her little community were not allowed to bask too long in the sunshine of this Providential intervention, however. Like a sudden thunderstorm blowing up and darkening the summer's day, the 'floods and torrents' once more engulfed them - and it seemed to them that this was the very greatest of the "obstacles" they had encountered up to this. We should have mentioned that the old Bishop, Dr. Lynch, their father and friend from the beginning, had died in 1896,

but this great loss was somewhat modified for the community by the fact that his successor, Dr. Foley, former President of St. Patrick's College, was a very good friend also from the beginning and had been their confessor from their arrival on the Bridge. Now this young Bishop, who knew them so well and had the confidence of old Dr. Lynch, came to ask the nuns to give up the strict enclosure of the Rule of St. Clare and take on some active work, preferably teaching! Mother Seraphine and the Sisters felt the proposal dreadfully, coming from one who had been such a support in the years of trial; but they realised that his council had insisted on the ultimatum now that the community seemed on the point of establishing itself!

Their dilemma was by no means unique in the history of the Order. We have seen that it could not be avoided during the penal persecution in Ireland and elsewhere; but even St. Clare herself had to grapple with it. Pope Gregory IX, who had the utmost respect and veneration for Clare, attempted to persuade her to accept some possessions as security and protection in the dangers of that troubled period of the 13th century. When she would in no way acquiesce, the Pope offered to absolve her from her vow in case that was her objection, but St. Clare replied: "Holy Father, absolve me from my sins but never in any way do I wish to be absolved from the following of Christ". (Legend of St. Clare 14). Mother Seraphine had feared this situation at the very outset, but not at this stage when all the "obstacles" seemed to have been overcome. The Bishop had given the community a few days to think and pray about the matter and then returned to hear their decision, seeing each Sister individually. He was very disappointed when each one begged to be allowed to keep her original vow of Poverty and Enclosure according to the Rule of St. Clare, and left saying that the only course open to them now was to lay the whole matter before the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII, on his first visit to the Vatican which was due very shortly.

While he was away, Mother Seraphine and her Sisters prayed day and night as they had never prayed before, asking their Levenshulme sisters to join with them. They felt that "old Nick" was making his last fight against the foundation. Woman of faith that she was, Mother Seraphine was very conscious that it was not "against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the Sovereignities and Powers who originate the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens". (Eph. 6:12). Far from cowering her indomitable spirit, this last challenge was simply fuel for the fire of her ardent faith and trust in the Providence of the Father of Mercies. The waters of tribulation could not quench that living flame - and the battle was won.

Hardly had Dr. Foley come into the presence of His Holiness when Pope Leo asked him, before he had time to mention one word about his Poor Clare problem: "Have you a contemplative Order in your diocese?" The Bishop replied that there was a community of enclosed Poor Clares but they were not properly established yet. "Establish them and be good to them", said the Holy Father - words quite in keeping with his publicly-stated opinion that if he had his way there would be a contemplative Order in every diocese in the world, no matter how small or how poor the diocese might be.

When Dr. Foley visited the overjoyed nuns on his return from Rome, it was easy to see that he was not at all sorry at the way things had turned out. After telling them all about the Holy Father he added: "So the fight is over now, you stuck well to your guns, everyone of you, and well for you that you did!"

CHAPTER 8

HAPPY TRANSPLANTING

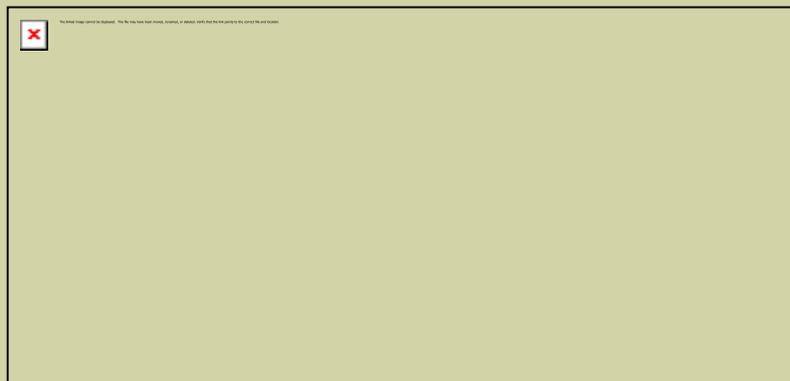
During all this time the generosity of friends near and far had continued unstintingly, so that the building fund held some £400 in excess of the £2,000 necessary before permission would be given for work to start. The long-awaited day came at last, when the foundation stone was laid by Most Rev. Dr. Foley, Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin, on March 6th, 1899, feast of St. Colette, the great reformer of the Order in the fifteenth century.

One final difficulty remained to be solved: the question of canonical enclosure. While in their temporary abode on the Bridge the nuns had to attend Sunday Mass in the parish church when a priest was not available but in their new convent it would be necessary to have a permanent chaplain in order to be canonically enclosed. The only alternative would be to be attached to the parish church and this is what Mother Seraphine had in mind from the outset; but for the present Divine Providence again intervened on their behalf and sent an eager young girl from Dublin, Mary McCann, whose wealthy parents gladly endowed a chaplaincy for the new monastery.

ONLY DAUGHTER OF A DUBLIN M.P.

The account of this young lady's vocation makes an interesting story in itself. She was the only daughter of a Dublin M.P., James McCann, and one summer's day the family with some friends were passing by the old house on the Bridge in their houseboat on the Barrow, drawn by horses along the banks just like the canal boats that were constantly passing and repassing each day. The bell for Vespers was being rung and the girl asked the old man guiding the boat what it was, her curiosity roused because it looked such a dilapidated place. He told her it was the Poor Clares going to say their prayers, and after a few more questions she made him show her how to get in to speak to the nuns. Mother Seraphine and a few of the Sisters met her afterwards and she plied them with questions about their lifestyle, pretending to think that it was dreadful and leaving them with the impression that she was an impertinent young lady - except Mother Seraphine, who said to their astonishment: "That girl will be a Poor Clare yet". A few days later a lovely letter arrived from Mary McCann apologising for being so rude and confessing that she really felt very attracted to the life but was not very strong and was sure that her parents would never allow her to think of entering. She did speak to them about her desire, but they would not hear of it so after some time she wrote to say that she

had decided to enter a convent in Dublin which had perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to which she was deeply devoted. When saying goodbye to her aunt, herself a nun in the Franciscan Convent of Perpetual Adoration in Drumshanbo, her niece mentioned that although she was entering in the Dublin convent, her heart was with the Poor Clares in Carlow. Her aunt advised her to postpone her entry into the convent and to see a priest about her vocation. The result was that he was sure Mary McCann had a genuine vocation to the Poor Clares, her good mother then gave her permission and Dr. Foley, himself, examined her to see if she really understood what the life involved. He was quite satisfied that she did and so Mary McCann became a devoted Poor Clare as Mother Seraphine had predicted. But the Bishop would not allow her to enter on the Bridge when the new monastery was about to materialise, and so she went over to Levenshulme monastery to make her novitiate and profession. Although always of a delicate constitution, she was able for all the rigours of those early days and her wonderful love for the Most Blessed Sacrament was well known to all who knew her.



The Poor Clare Monastery and Chapel at the beginning of the Century

Sister Magdalen (the name she was given in religion) arrived back in Graiguecullen soon after her profession on a most joyful day for the Poor Clare community, to begin with them their life of prayer, penance and praise in the long-awaited new monastery, completed and ready for occupation on 22nd July, 1900 - the feastday of her own patroness, Saint Mary Magdalen!

“RIVER TORTO”

It was a glorious day for the community indeed. The long wait of those seven eventful years was over; faith and hope had triumphed over the dark days of trial and difficulty and a radiant sun beamed down on the little band of Poor Clares as they left their “Rivo Torto” on the Bridge for the last time to attend High Mass in the old parish church (now St. Fiacc’s Hall) and then walked in procession the short distance to the new monastery on the other side of the road, led by Most Rev. Dr. Foley, the priests and friars, with all the people following. As they walked along, the Bishop, highly pleased at the happy ending to his problem, turned to Fr. Arthur Murphy, the curate and great friend of the community from its earliest days and said: “Did we ever think we would see this day, Arthur?” “I did, my Lord”, said Fr. Murphy, “but you didn’t!”

Then followed the full ceremony of canonical enclosure, with the Bishop and priests going through all the rooms upstairs and downstairs, blessing each one, followed, of course, by the community and all the people too. At the conclusion, the Bishop handed the keys to the happy Abbess and everyone left the enclosure area, where, at last, the little community (now grown to eight) found themselves at home at the ending of a perfect day, never to be forgotten in the history of our foundation.

The Nationalist & Leinster Times of July 28th carried a detailed account of the monastery building and all the events of the day, commenting: "The ceremony of blessing and closing the different modes of ingress and egress was very solemn, especially when associated with the thought that the nuns, thus enclosed within the walls of the convent, had seen their last of this world as far as its pleasures and vanities are concerned". If people, kindly but not quite understanding, felt compassion for the Poor Nuns that July day in 1900 as they still do for the spiritual daughters of those Poor Nuns today, "shutting themselves up" like that, then it was all wasted on Mother Seraphine and her overjoyed sisters - of any century! No, for those called to it by God, enclosure is not a burden but a precious gift of God and the Church. It is not an end in itself; it is support, a very good servant of the contemplative life. The contemplative person out in the highways and byways of the world - like Mother Teresa of Calcutta and other wonderful people close to God - one can see and understand and appreciate the depth of their self giving on behalf of their needy neighbour. But not so the enclosed contemplative. This form of the religious life will always be a mystery to many. It is a rare vocation, strongly upheld by the Church through the centuries and re-emphasised by Vatican Council 11 and many Papal pronouncements since then, where those called to it respond by a single-hearted occupation with God alone. And it is precisely in responding to this irresistible call that the enclosed contemplative discovers the 'length and breadth, the height and the depth' of her vocation: she discovers that it includes a deep union and solidarity with every sister and brother of the human family, known or unknown, near or far away, so that their suffering, poverty, distress and anguish became hers too, and she pleads for them with the Father of Mercies day and night. This is because the closer one is drawn near to God the more one is transformed into His likeness - and God is Love. Some little spark of the Divine compassion and love begins to kindle a flame in her heart and all she has to do is to put no obstacle in the way, to open herself totally to this invasion of Love. To respond to this invitation to share ever more deeply in the Divine life of the Father, Son and Spirit the enclosed contemplative must hear the call: "Be still and know that I am God". (Psalm 46). And that is what enclosure is all about.

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

It provides the setting for the silence and solitude that are absolutely necessary in her apostolate of prayer and penance, praise and intercession, joyful thanksgiving and sorrow for sin - her own, as well as the sins and weaknesses of others. The greatest service enclosed contemplatives can offer the world is not to open the enclosure doors and take their place with their toiling brothers and sisters in the Lord's vineyards, but to be totally available to the Lord so that He may accomplish His work of holiness in them in the circumstances of their hidden life. Then their

prayer to the Lord of the harvest for their outwardly active sisters and brothers will be wonderfully effective because it will be the prayer of Jesus Himself, bearing a fruitful harvest in the mission fields of the world, in hospital beds, in lonely rooms, in confused minds and broken hearts, in struggling families and bodies and souls imprisoned by addiction of all kinds. Each vocation is necessary, each is God's gracious gift, "not because of anything we, ourselves, have done but for His own purpose and by His own grace". (2 Tim. 1:9). It all depends on God, why one is called to live in silence and solitude with her sisters in a confined space, and another is called to travel the world as a servant of the Gospel. St. Clare knew it well in the thirteenth century: "Hasten on with swift pace and light step and un stumbling feet, so that your footsteps raise no dust as you move swiftly and joyfully, eagerly and carefully along the path of happiness. Thrust on one, yield to no one who would deter you from this goal or obstruct your path to prevent you from fulfilling your vows to the Most High in the way of perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you". (St. Clare's Second Letter to St. Agnes of Prague).

CHAPTER 9

THE FLOWERING

Now that the great ambition of her life had been fulfilled and girls continued to apply for admission to the new monastery, Mother Seraphine felt that the time was ripe to satisfy yet another ardent desire of her heart: perpetual adoration of the most Blessed Sacrament. Devotion to the Eucharistic Presence of Jesus has always been a characteristic of the Poor Clares, the precious legacy of St. Clare to her spiritual daughters throughout the centuries. Poor Clare communities generally all over the world have Eucharistic adoration during the day and perhaps part of the night, but perpetual adoration, day and night continuously, is optional. To Mother Seraphine's clear faith and ardent love it was, as she herself expressed it with beautiful simplicity. "a poor case to go off and leave Our Lord all by Himself when he has come down all the way from heaven to us". To the Bishop's objection that perhaps the money for the purchase of the necessary candles would not always be available, Mother Seraphine's faith and simplicity again won the day. "My Lord", she replied, "won't the King of heaven and earth be able to keep Himself in candles by inspiring people to send them or donate the money if He wants us to stay with Him day and night?" And the Bishop could only reply: "Woman, great is thy faith!" (Matt. 15:28). In reality he was delighted to have perpetual adoration in his diocese, so from July 22nd, 1903, anniversary day of the opening of the monastery, perpetual adoration has been a treasured privilege of our community in Graiguecullen.

"Eucharistic adoration - which extends the grace of the eucharistic sacrifice - is beneficial to the entire community of the Church. It impels the soul to cultivate a 'social' love by which we give preference to the common good, make our own the interests of the community, of the parish, of the church, and extend our charity to the whole world" Pope Paul VI.

" A moment of true adoration has greater value and spiritual fruit than the most intense activity, even apostolic activity itself" Pope John Paul 11

CHAPTER 10

NEW SLIPS PLANTED

Applications for admission continued to increase steadily, many from Dublin. Mother Seraphine began to think and dream again And when Sr. Magdalen (the Dublin Mary McCann) voiced her secret desire of speaking to her father about a possible Dublin foundation, she certainly was not discouraged. The good man was only too pleased to do something for the Lord as well as his daughter, and after permission had been granted by the Archbishop, he most generously gave a house and garden which he owned, defraying the expenses himself of converting it into a convent.

JOY OF HER PARENTS

Postulants had been allowed to enter in Griaguecullen for the express purpose of going on the new foundation, so in 1906 no less than eight Sisters left for Donnybrook, one of them being Sr. Magdalen, no doubt to the great joy of her parents. They found many waiting for their arrival, eager to enter. One of these was a lady who donated her wealth to build a proper monastery attached to the original house, and the 1910 this was ready and the community enclosed there with Mother Genevieve as Abbess. Here Sr. Magdalen died in 1920 after over twenty years of devoted Poor Clare living.

In 1924 the Donnybrook community made a new foundation in Belfast, to the great delight of Mother Seraphine and in 1950 a second one in Neath, South Wales.

FOUNDATION IN CORK

Only six years after the Dublin foundation Mother Seraphine was approached by a holy Jesuit priest with a proposal for a foundation in Cork. He was the well known Fr. Willie Doyle. A great friend of his (another wealthy man!) in Cork had a daughter who had entered and was professed in a Belgian Poor Clare Colettine monastery. The father had mentioned to his priest friend how sad he was that his daughter was so far away and what a great joy it would be to him to have her somewhere near, praying for him. When Fr. Willie Doyle suggested that he finance a foundation of the Poor Clares in Cork so that his daughter could transfer there, he was delighted with the idea. And so it came about that in 1914 Sr. Maria, back from Belgium in her native city, was welcomed by another happy father to the monastery he had built, together with five other Sisters from St. Clare's community in Griaguecullen. This time it was Mother Angela, first companion of Mother Seraphine in Ireland, who was sent as Abbess of the new Cork foundation. In 1952 the Cork community was able to found a monastery in Bothwell, Scotland and another in Ennis in 1958.

CHAPTER 11

A NEW PARISH CHURCH



The years were passing and in the heart of Mother Seraphine, now into her eighties, one last long-standing desire was still unfulfilled. Ever since her arrival and first visit to the poor little church in Graiguecullen she had been pained to see the dilapidated state of the building. From then on a new parish church was as dear a project to her heart as a new convent. She wanted to have it attached to the monastery so that the Sisters would have the benefit of the Masses. So when Mr. Governey, in his great generosity, offered her as much ground as she needed, Mother Seraphine was careful to include a site for a future parish church as well,

and continued during the years to collect funds for this purpose. Walking in the garden, a church spire had attracted her attention. She was told that it was St. Anne's Protestant Memorial Church, erected to commemorate the parliamentary victory of the son of the local landlord Bruen over the don of Daniel O'Connell - but now unused. Day after day she laid siege to the coveted treasure by prayer, Rosary beads in hand - and if she did not move a mountain she certainly, in no small degree, helped to move a Protestant Church a mile down the road to become St. Clare's Parish Church of Graiguecullen, opened for Catholic worship by Providential coincidence in 1929, when Ireland was celebrating the centenary of Catholic Emancipation! The older generation of local people still have memories of the huge stones being carted voluntarily by local farmers to the site, after being dismantled and painstakingly numbered before being erected in Graiguecullen as the new Parish Church attached to the monastery. The newly appointed parish priest, Very Rev. J. Fogarty, already well known in the diocese as a talented church builder, was the culmination of Mother Seraphine's desires. She had recognised this at their first meeting, saying happily, with all the gratitude and relief of the holy old Simeon in the Gospel narrative: "I don't care how soon I die now".

CHAPTER 12

'NUNC DIMITTIS'

The Lord whom she had so faithfully and lovingly served for almost sixty years of her life took her at word: Mother Seraphine did not live to see the glorious day in 1929 when the new parish church was opened for worship. She died exactly a fortnight after the foundation stone was laid, on June 7th, 1928, which that year was the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ - surely a fitting day for this great lover of our Eucharistic Lord to meet Him in the face-to-face vision of the eternal reality. She was eighty-two years of age, thirty-five of which had been spent in her beloved Graiguecullen in the monastery of St. Clare which she had won by her invincible faith and simple, trusting love.

Mother Seraphine was, indeed, a true daughter of St. Francis and St. Clare, the founders of the Order that she loved so much. She shared in their deep, tender, lively love of the Incarnate Son of God in the crib, on the Cross and on the Altar; in the same ideal of complete Gospel poverty; in the same joyful dependence on the Providence of the Father of Mercies; in the same poetic love of nature as a mirror of the beauty and wisdom of God; in the same ardent, simple love of the Blessed Virgin and her Rosary. (One of her saying was: No prayer could surpass the Hail Mary in beauty' And it was while the Rosary was being recited around her bed that she gave back her childlike soul to her Creator).

STRIKING CHARACTERISTICS

One of Mother Seraphine's most striking characteristics was her simplicity. When asked once whether she understood all the psalms and long Readings of the Divine Office, which, of course, in her day were all Latin, and into which she put her whole

earnest self, she answered: "I don't, my dear, nor do I want to. I think of Our Lord there in front of me and I join with the angels that cluster around Him, and sing away". Though most intelligent, she never used a book in prayer. "How could I read and Our Lord there in His monstrance looking at me? I just look back at Him and love Him". To all who knew and loved her, the burning words of St. Clare in her Testament, when she herself was near to death, seem a clear picture of her faithful daughter in Graiguecullen:

"In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my Sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of mutual courtesy, as we were taught from the beginning by our Blessed Father Francis"

CHAPTER 13

THE END OF THE CENTURY

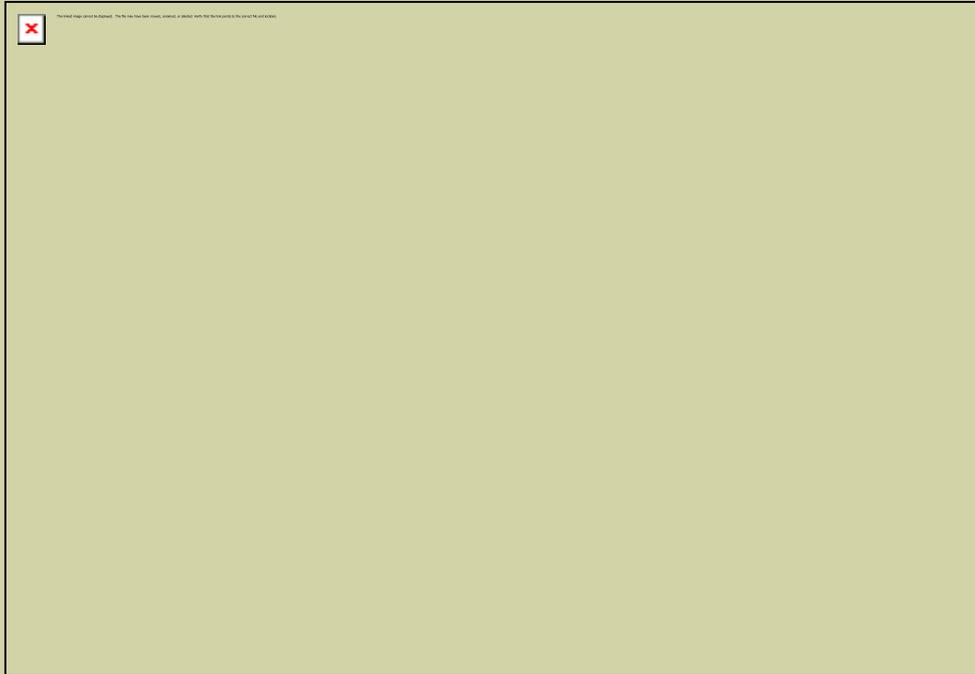
After Mother Seraphine's death in 1928, Mother Teresa Curtis succeeded her as Abbess and then Mother Oliver O'Brien and Mother Eugene Campbell. In more recent times the office was held by Mother Agnes Griffin, Mother Francis O'Brien, Mother Eugene Campbell and Mother Clare Marie, our present Abbess.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed some changes in our Poor Clare life, with Pope Pius XI advocating the federation of monasteries of the same region, and the Second Vatican Council confirming this in its call for renewal and revitalisation of the spirit of each Order's founder. In 1973 our community united with the six other contemplative Poor Clare monasteries in Ireland and three in Great Britain which had been founded from Irish houses, to form a Federation. The purpose of the federation is to help each other to live the ideals of Saint Clare in today's world and assist each other in areas such as formation, personnel and finances when needed. This has brought about a certain amount of visibility also, compared with former times, insofar as we occasionally travel to one of our other monasteries for meetings or courses on Franciscan spirituality, liturgy, scripture and so forth. But each monastery remains autonomous, and the basic structure of our Poor Clare contemplative lifestyle has remained unchanged in its essentials of prayer, seclusion and total dependence on God's merciful Providence for our support.

DEEPLY ROOTED IN FAITH

One hundred years of Poor Clare living in Graiguecullen parish, depending solely on the Providence of the Father of Mercies, have deeply rooted us in faith and trustful confidence. The generosity of our kind neighbours, friends and benefactors has been unbounded, enabling us to make many useful and necessary additions and renovations to the original building through the years. We remember with particular gratitude the extra strip added to our garden in the 1970's with the enclosure wall around it, the total cost being donated by many wonderful people. The very latest addition, three-quarters of an acre from the old school playing field adjoining our

garden, has been a marvellous boon to us providing much -needed space for simply walking and cycling! Yes, the gift of a bicycle has added new perspectives to our enclosure area and proved beyond doubt that once a cyclist, definitely NOT a cyclist forever. Thirty years later does make a difference!



Day and night, as we keep vigil in turn before our Divine Lord's Sacramental Presence, we praise and thank Him for all the wonderful people, know and unknown, near and far away, past and present, who have been and are the instruments of His overflowing generosity to us. We praise and adore Him on behalf of all our brothers and sisters throughout the world who neglect this duty of grateful love. And for the needs of all we intercede continuously before Him, because the "fatigues, misery and hopes" of the children of our common Father, in their personal and family lives, are ours too. This is our vocation in the church - "to be co-workers with God himself", as St. Clare expressed it. For our Sisters during the last hundred years who have handed on this glorious heritage to us we give thanks above all. May we be as faithful and dedicated as they were, as the dawn of a new century breaks on a restless world.

This year 2004 we celebrate the privilege of 100 years of perpetual Eucharistic adoration, where for twenty four-hours, night and day, there are sisters praying before the Blessed Sacrament throughout the year.

