

Five decades of service described in 'Mercy comes to Rochester'

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Diocesan Archivist

In 1827, Mother Catherine McAuley (1781-1841) founded, in Dublin, Ireland, the Religious Sisters of Mercy (R.S.M.). Approved as a pontifical religious order by the Holy See as early as 1841, the Sisters of Mercy spread quickly across Ireland itself and into countless other English-speaking communities throughout the world.

The Rochester Sisters of Mercy furnish a good example of this rapid propagation. Bishop John Timon of Buffalo established them in a convent at St. Mary's Church, Rochester, in 1857, only 30 years after the Mercy movement had been launched. The Rochester founder was just one of some 10 made in the United States by a pioneer associate of Catherine McAuley, Mother M. Anne Marie White (1810-1886).

Now Sister Mary Florence Sullivan, C.S.W., has written the story of the first five decades in the communities and the Rochester Sisters of Mercy have published it as a limited edition. *Mercy Comes to Rochester* is a ring-bound paper-back of 128 pages plus 8 pages of carbon notes. The first scholarly study of the local Mercy congregation, it covers the years 1857-1901. Sister Florence is the ideal person to write such a study. A member of the Mercy sisterhood since 1916 and well-known as a teacher and principal (1961-1968) of Our Lady of Mercy High School, Sister has been archivist of the congregation since 1968. As such, she has built up a sizable archive out of a very small nucleus. Even before her archival appointment, she had been transcribing the recollections of senior sisters in the order. Thus, *Mercy Comes to Rochester* is based extensively on oral history painstakingly collected and judiciously drawn upon.

The method used by the Sisters of Mercy in establishing their early houses was, it seems to me, rather striking. Once a convent had been opened, it usually began to produce "clones" of itself in other localities. Thus, as early as 1858, the Rochester Mercy convent set up a daughter-house in Buffalo. In 1862, it initiated a second center in Batavia, N.Y.; and yet a third in Auburn in 1867. The Batavia house, in turn, founded daughter convents in the Southern Tier counties at Hornellsville, Corning, Elmira and Owego.

"Mercy," as defined by the Sisters of Mercy, is "love in the face of misery." Theirs was a social-action community. Once a convent was planted, it undertook a program of spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Youth was to be educated and protected; the sick were to be nursed at home or in hospitals; elderly women were to be housed. Beyond that, the rule had an "et cetera" clause which allowed the sisters to meet the challenge of any unanticipated social need.

They had come to Rochester primarily to

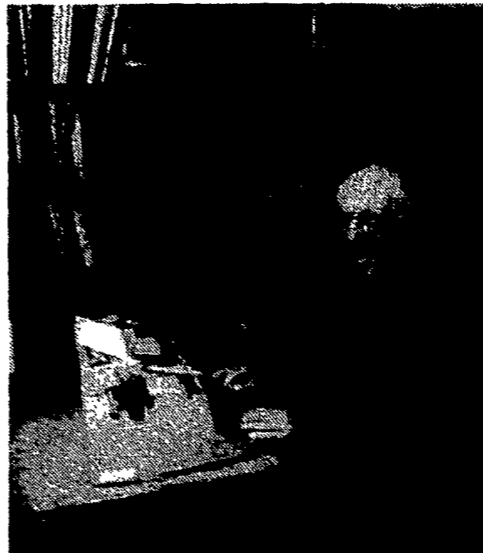


Sister Mary Florence Sullivan

teach the girls of the parish (laymen originally supervised the boys' classes). In addition to this church-basement "free school," the sisters also, according to widespread custom, operated a "select school" in the convent proper. Bishop Timon disliked select schools as undemocratic, but the tuition money paid for this fancier education was the main source of income to the sisters. The select school, called the "Academy of the Immaculate Conception," had both elementary and secondary segments. Thus it became the forerunner of Our Lady of Mercy High School.

Even the busy teaching sisters were required to engage in social work. At the outset, each local superior would prepare a "visitation roster." On visitation days, the sisters would go out in pairs to the homes of those who needed help. Sister Mary Florence takes this occasion to describe the traditional habit worn by the Sisters of Mercy, made all the more intricate by the elaborate outerwear that the sisters donned when they went on visitations. This impractical but imposing garb continued in use only slightly altered until December 28, 1965, when it yielded to an attractive modern habit designed by Dublin couturiere Sybil Connolly.

The "soup kitchen" was another enterprise begun by the sisters at St. Mary's as early as 1858 in the midst of an economic depression. Far more substantial as a social enterprise was the industrial school that the sisters opened in 1872. This was a training school for teenagers, orphans and half-orphans. While they were taught some academic classes, most of the girls' four-year course involved learning how to sew, make lace and create fancy waxwork. Father James P. Stewart, pastor of St. Mary's Church and the sisters' greatest booster, provided much of the support. A host of kind friends conducted benefit entertain-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Father Robert F. McNamara

ments on behalf of the school. The Rochester Board of Education paid small salaries to the teachers. Furthermore, the income from the sale of the garments, lace and ornaments made by the girls helped substantially to finance the undertaking. The industrial school never had more than a hundred students at any time in its three decades of existence, but it did a great service not only in training its students, but in securing employment for them.

Another important endeavor was the "Creche," a nursery school for the small children of working mothers. Opened in 1883, this Catholic nursery had the strong backing of Father Stewart and a number of well-to-do Catholic women. Outside of Rochester, the Mercy apostolate might develop along different lines. In Auburn, for instance, the sisters visited the inmates of the state prisons — male prisoners as well as female.

If the accomplishments of the early Mercy community were modest (the number of sisters was very small), they were positive, whole-hearted and welcomed. What is more, they were achieved against great odds. Sister M. Florence tells us very honestly about these multiple difficulties.

One of the problems was clashes of personality within the local order. For instance, the first superior, Mother Mary Baptist Coleman, was capable but turbulent. "By nature, she was a disturber," says the author. "The sisters found it most difficult to work peaceably with her." So did the bishops. In contrast with Mother Coleman was Mother Camillus Kelly. She was so even-tempered and exemplary that the sisters elected her general superior for eight terms.

An enduring problem experienced by the Rochester Sisters of Mercy was the unfriendly attitude manifested toward them by Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid, the first bishop

of Rochester. It is understandable that once he had set up a Rochester diocesan community of Sisters of St. Joseph, he should have made that sisterhood the object of his special interest. But it is puzzling that he should have restricted the number of candidates whom the Sisters of Mercy might accept, and that he should have practically ignored the contribution they were making. Sister M. Florence treats the painful experience perhaps a bit too fully, but with charity. This is wise, since the documentation on both sides has never been complete.

Actually, in 1901, Bishop McQuaid contributed, however unintentionally, to the enlargement of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy. In 1896, Pope Leo XIII had transferred the four Southern Tier counties to the Diocese of Rochester. The five Southern Tier houses of Sisters of Mercy had then formed a separate body centered in Hornellsville. In 1901, the bishop urged the Hornellsville congregation to vote on union with the Rochester Sisters of Mercy. Merger won out. Thus the Rochester Sisters of Mercy all at once acquired five additional missions and 32 additional sisters, bringing the total population of the Rochester community to a magnificent 86.

Sister Mary Florence has written affectionately and well of the beginnings of her congregation. Her account is an appropriate remembrance of the brave efforts of the early sisters to serve the Church and the community. It will also serve as a good foundation for the future historians who undertake to report on the later good deeds of the Mercy-come-to-Rochester.

"*Mercy Comes to Rochester*" was written by Sister Mary Florence Sullivan, R.S.M., the congregation's first archivist. She began collecting and organizing archival material even before her retirement from her post as principal of Our Lady of Mercy High School 17 years ago, but assumed that work full time afterward. The book was released by the Rochester Sisters of Mercy in October. Now 89, Sister M. Florence has meanwhile completed another chapter of more recent Mercy history.

Christmas Choir

Nazareth College Choir will present two free holiday programs on classical and contemporary music. Performances will be Saturday, Dec. 14, at 12:30 p.m. in the Gerald G. Wilmot Hall of Music at the Nazareth Arts Center; and Sunday, Dec. 15, 4 p.m., at the Asbury First United Methodist Church, 1050 East Ave., Rochester.

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