

The Rule of the Community of Saint Mary: A Study in Development

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Introduction

IN THE SECOND HALF of the nineteenth century, in New York City, William Augustus Muhlenberg, an Episcopal priest of the evangelical school and Lutheran background, Harriet Starr Cannon, a music teacher of reduced circumstances and an indifferent education, and Morgan Dix, another Episcopal priest belonging to New York's most distinguished social register and high church party, managed between them to usher into existence one of the most successful religious congregations of the American Episcopal Church. The only thing this unlikely trio shared was absolutely no experience of the religious life. Religious congregations were taking their first tentative steps in the Anglican Communion. The Tractarian movement had polarised Anglican opinion, and ensured that any appearance of Romanism would be met with suspicion and virulent criticism. Roman Catholics themselves often regarded these new religious as impostors and charlatans, and were not above hurling abuse at them, both from the pulpit and on the street.¹

This essay will pursue the development of an idea—the idea of an Episcopalian religious order for women—as it was shaped by the personalities, theories, prejudices, and experiences of Drs. Muhlenberg and Dix and Mother Harriet. Particular attention will be paid to their contribution to one of the clearest expressions of their idea of religious life, the Rule, or rather Rules, which were observed, tested, discarded, and adapted by the emerging Community of Saint Mary.

¹ The archives of the Community of St Mary contain a number of vignettes from the 1860's and 70's, detailing insults and accusations made against their sisters. In 1870 a Dominican priest, Fr. Wilson, was reported to have denounced the Sisters as 'wolves in sheep's clothing', "Protestants dressed to look like ra'al Catholic Sisters", "She-devils, who go about only to proselyte, and ravage the fold of the faithful"

‘The Rule’

In the history of the church, there are few “Rules” for the religious life. In the western church, St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Benedict laid the written foundations for most subsequent communities of men and women. The friars movement produced only one significantly new Rule, that of St. Francis; other friars, like the Carmelites and Dominicans, essentially observed variations on Augustine’s Rule. The only other substantial addition to this body took place in the Counter Reformation, with St. Ignatius’ vision for his nascent Society of Jesus. While not technically a ‘Rule’, many, perhaps most, of the religious congregations founded between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries adopted the Jesuit Constitutions, with its concept of ‘simple vows’ and its accompanying Ignatian spirituality.

Normally any religious order’s “Rule” might be described as coexisting with its “Constitutions” in much the same way that the United States’ Constitution coexists with its body of laws: one articulates a vision, a set of guiding principles, while the other translates that vision into practical, day to day expressions. The “Rule” of a religious order normally remains constant: the constitutions may vary from year to year, from province to province, according to needs and circumstances. In addition to these documents, individual houses may add ‘particular statutes’ or ‘customaries’.

“Rules” convey much of the personality and spirituality of the founder, and in turn form—and inform—those who subsequently join an order. St. Francis, for example, inserted a rule which reads “Let the Friars take care not to appear gloomy and sad like hypocrites, but let them be jovial and merry”². That only four basic traditions have survived the centuries in the Western Church might indicate that their successful establishment is a rare achievement, and always the product of experimentation and revision on the part of the author. That those four traditions are attributable to saints of the stature of Augustine, Benedict, Francis and Ignatius suggests they are works of rare spiritual genius.

However, a Rule also frees an emerging community from the sometimes overwhelming personal influence of the founder. Brian Golding, writing on the Gilbertines, assessed their Rule as marking a “faultline in the group’s development which was most characterised by a shift from the personal authority of the founder to institutional control Though a Rule was necessary

² see “Rule of St. Francis”, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, edited by C.G. Herbermann, E.A. Pace, C.B. Pallen, T.J. Shahan, J.J. Wynne; New York : Appleton, 1907-12

if the community was to be more than ephemeral, it is clear that its adoption both irrevocably changed the character of the original foundation and did not always correspond to the founder's desires".³

The long-term survival of the Community of St. Mary, then, depended on settling upon a Rule that would both incorporate the genius of its founders, as well as freeing it to articulate and sustain an independent identity. What the founders brought to the formulation of this identity is the subject of the following pages.

William Augustus Muhlenberg

According to one's personal perspective, William Augustus Muhlenberg's career could be portrayed as a series of extraordinary achievements or a story of fickleness and failure. After incurring the wrath of Lancaster, Pennsylvania's, leading Episcopalian family, the Coleman's, over innovations he had made to the service schedule, he resigned his rectorship in 1826 and moved to St. George's, Flushing, where immediately he began to lay plans for a boys' school, to be known as the Flushing Institute. The Institute opened its doors in early 1827. In 1836 he bought a one hundred acre property four miles north of Flushing and published the prospectus for his next project, St. Paul's College, which incorporated the Institute. Of the nine hundred students who were to pass through St. Paul's, approximately fifty were to enter the ministry and three were to become bishops.⁴ However, within a decade Muhlenberg's interest lay elsewhere, namely the church his sister was building for him in Manhattan, the Church of the Holy Communion. St. Paul's foundered shortly after his departure, the only trace of its prestige preserved in the name it gave to its locale, College Point. Holy Communion, completed in 1845, was one of the earliest Free Churches in the United States, and the list of Muhlenberg's accomplishments there is impressive, including a free dispensary, an infirmary, a fund to send the poor on vacations outside the city, an employment society for poor women, an annual Christmas party for neighbourhood children, and a parish school⁵. The parish was to decline in the

³ Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.78

⁴ A.W. Skardin, *William Augustus Muhlenberg*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1971 pp. 97, 99

⁵ Anne Ayres, *The Life and Work of William Augustus Muhlenberg*, Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1884, p. 197

decades after his leaving; at the time of writing, it functions as a nightclub when its owner is not imprisoned.

During his first year as rector of the Church of the Holy Communion, he conceived his next project, the founding of a Christian Hospital, and set about collecting funds and training women workers. This project was to see firstly the beginnings of the Sisters of the Holy Communion in 1845, and secondly the foundation in 1858 of St. Luke's Hospital, the institution they were destined to serve. Apart from St. Luke's, Dr. Muhlenberg's place in Episcopal Church History was perhaps best secured by two undertakings in the early 1850's, the publication in 1851 of a monthly journal, *The Evangelical Catholic*, and his Memorial to the House of Bishops at the 1853 General Convention. Ironically, the latter was to prove the death of the former: the editor resigned over Muhlenberg's opinions, and the paper folded within months of the Memorial.⁶ The Memorial was likewise to prove an ephemeral achievement. However, Muhlenberg's sights were to shift once more before his death: seven years after St. Luke's opened its doors, he purchased land on Long Island for his next project, St. Johnland, which was intended to provide housing and employment for the worthy poor, who were to be relocated from city slums to a rural setting. While St. Johnland was only to achieve a fraction of Muhlenberg's dreams for it, nevertheless it provided valuable service and was to continue to function, in one form or another, for nearly a century and a half. Muhlenberg was to die at St. Johnland in 1877.

Despite the chequered complexion of Dr. Muhlenberg's career, there are some remarkable consistencies, which were to have a direct impact on the Sisters of the Holy Communion and the formation accorded Harriet Starr Cannon. The first is that Dr Muhlenberg was involved in institutional ministry for much of his life, from the Flushing Institute to St Johnland. As early as 1837, Muhlenberg was confronted with the practical details of organising a group of individuals, moulding them into a community according to a certain vision, overseeing their intellectual and moral formation, and balancing their physical, spiritual and emotional needs. While promoting a thoroughly English education at Flushing Institute and St. Paul's, including the arts and sciences, Muhlenberg also regarded moral education as equally important. The two institutions were denominational academies, where scriptural study was a daily requirement and the Book of Common Prayer part of the everyday regimen. The remoteness of the setting, relatively intensive supervision and an emphasis on sports and

⁶ Alvin W. Skardon, *op.cit.*, p.175

recreation were all designed to minimise disciplinary problems. Overarching this structure was Muhlenberg's own presence: the diaries of both students and staff record their warm regard and respect for his firm but benign oversight⁷, and throughout his life he appears to have retained the friendship of many of his pupils despite substantial differences of opinion.⁸

One of the difficulties of this arrangement, however, was the sameness of some of the daily routine. The sequence of seasons allowed for a variety of sports, from skating to boating and bathing, and similarly the academic curriculum could be constructed to build incrementally on a student's growing abilities. However, in arranging the boys' devotional life, Muhlenberg was to encounter a problem with which he was to struggle for decades to come. This is the second consistency in his career, namely a striving for variety. In an addenda to his 1854 *An Exposition of the Memorial of Sundry Presbyters to the House of Bishops*, Muhlenberg encapsulates decades of frustration: under the heading of "Rigidity of the Service", he begins "The want of sympathy in our services with particular circumstances and occasions is not easily defended". Muhlenberg goes on to deplore "the extreme to which sameness is carried in our service", the unvarying formulae, the obliviousness of the text to local needs and seasonal changes, the "present inflexibility" and "stereotyped routine".⁹ Part of Muhlenberg's solution was the use of music: he had been instrumental in the publication of the 1827 Hymnal and maintained a lifelong interest in music and hymnography. However, reminiscences of a former St Paul's student indicate Dr. Muhlenberg's imagination was not confined to melody: "The chapel was brilliant on the great festivals with candles and emblems. At the Christmas services a picture of the Virgin and the Holy Child was placed above the altar, wreathed with holly. On Good Friday, a picture of the Crucifixion, with drapery of black. On Easter, oh how glorious the service which began with the rising sun! There were the bright lights and the fragrant flowers; among these always

⁷ See T. K. Wharton's reminiscences, as quoted in A. Skardon, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-77

⁸ James Kerfoot, onetime student and lifelong supporter of Muhlenberg, became the indisputably High Church first bishop of Pittsburgh, and Muhlenberg himself maintained a practical interest in the career of James Breck, who graduated from Flushing to enter the General Theological Seminary and became one of the founders of Nashotah House and later Seabury Divinity School. Both Kerfoot and Breck named sons after Muhlenberg. On the other hand, Gregory Bedell spent most of his childhood and adolescence under Muhlenberg and grew up to be identified with the extreme Low Church party as Bishop of Ohio. See A. Skardon, *op.cit.*, pp 88-98

⁹ cf. W. A. Muhlenberg, *Evangelical Catholic Papers*, Anne Ayres (ed), St. Johnland Press and Stereotype Foundry, Suffolk County, NY, 1875, pp. 163-175

the calla lily and the hyacinth.”¹⁰ He would bring this thirst for variety and an awareness of local and seasonal needs to the Church of the Holy Communion. Early in his administration, he split the long Sunday morning service into three separate services and introduced a weekly communion service. Dr. Clinton Locke, who attended during the eighteen fifties, regarded the Church of the Holy Communion then as “Our highest exponent of ceremonial and ritual. then considered the extremest height possible”.¹¹ General Theological students closely followed the innovations at the nearby parish, just three blocks east of the seminary. One seminarian later wrote “We looked upon the worthy doctor as neither low nor high, nor dry, but as true Catholic in the romantic sense of the word. He was particularly a favorite among students of the ritualistic type”.¹² Despite being regarded by many as a Tractarian at this time, Muhlenberg was insistent that his innovations were not “of the Romish type, but the product of imagination in accordance with the verities of our religion”.¹³ Muhlenberg may have been a little disingenuous in this assertion: while a student in Pennsylvania he not only took up the study of music but was known to frequent Philadelphia’s Roman Catholic parishes. He asserted that his decision not to marry was taken after hearing a sermon at a Roman Catholic Mass, during which the preacher had spoken about man having only one heart with which to love God, a heart that cannot be divided.¹⁴ Never a particularly original thinker, Muhlenberg’s entire career demonstrated rather a genius for imitation. What he regarded as purely the product of his own imagination in New York, appeared decidedly Roman to others. Nevertheless, Muhlenberg’s churchmanship during his time at Church of the Holy Communion largely defied categorisation. While one contemporary considered that in his early years at Holy Communion, Muhlenberg “had not clearly defined either to himself or to others his doctrinal position”¹⁵, another less generous contemporary, perhaps closer to the truth, is reported to have said of Muhlenberg that he “liked any ceremonial, as long as it meant nothing”¹⁶. Up until the 1850’s, questions of churchmanship—high, low or broad—clearly did not engage him so much as making the liturgy of the church as accessible as possible to his congregation. The most salient feature of

¹⁰ Rev. Dr. L. Van Bokkelen, as quoted, Anne Ayres, op. cit., p. 148

¹¹ Anne Ayres, op. cit., p. 148

¹² Fr. Clarence Walworth, as quoted, Alvin W. Skardon, op. cit., p.189

¹³ Anne Ayres, op. cit., p. 148

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 91

¹⁵ Dr. Harwood, as quoted, Alvin W. Skardon, op. cit., p.189

¹⁶ unattributed quote, Sr. Hilary, *A Study in the Anglican Revival of the Religious Life*, unpublished, c.1945, CSM archives, II:5

Muhlenberg's liturgical style to emerge from these years is his pastoral sensitivity, expressed in impatience with 'sameness' and a thirst for novelty.

Mention of the Memorial underscores another of Muhlenberg's characteristics, namely his sense of the catholicity of the church. This was clearly not 'catholicity' as understood by the Tractarians, but the product of his unique personal experience. A significant element in Muhlenberg's religious make-up was his strong Lutheran background. Not only was he raised a Lutheran, but he was a descendant of Lutheran clergymen. When his grand-uncle, Peter Muhlenberg, had been assigned to a Lutheran parish in Virginia, he was required to be ordained as a Anglican priest: in order to be supported by tax money, he needed to be a clergyman of Virginia's established church, and so he travelled to England, was ordained a deacon and priest of the Church of England, and returned to Virginia to minister to his Lutheran flock.¹⁷ Thus Muhlenberg's family history embodied a fusion—some might say a confusion—of religious traditions. This provides an insight to the main thrust of Muhlenberg's Memorial, concerning the recognition of Protestant orders, but it also explains the ease with which he borrowed from other religious traditions, particularly Lutheran and Roman Catholic. As illustrated above, Muhlenberg chafed under rigid Episcopalian protocols, and continued to do until the end of his life: his last church, at St. Johnland, he determined would be denominationally Episcopalian, but not a regularly constituted parish. He believed that by describing the church as the chapel of an independent corporation, he would be able to distance himself from Episcopalian norms and have greater liberty to pursue the Evangelical agenda, moving closer to other Protestant denominations.¹⁸

Another consistent theme to Muhlenberg's career was his indisputable commitment to the poor and underprivileged. The Church of the Holy Communion was built with money left for the purpose by his brother in law and, as has been detailed above, the parish undertook an impressive number of initiatives to not only assist but also to permanently alleviate the predicament of the poor. Just as the Church of the Holy Communion had been built as a Free Church, St. Luke's was built as a free hospital and pursued a policy of never turning a patient away. The land for Muhlenberg's last project, St. Johnland, was purchased with his own money and the objectives of the venture included housing for the aged, the disabled, and homeless children, to create paying jobs for the unemployed, and to provide education, especially for boys or young men

¹⁷ A. W. Skardon, *op. cit.*, p.207

¹⁸ A. Skardon, *op. cit.*, p. 254

who might consider entering the ministry. Muhlenberg used the remains of his personal resources to make St. Johnland a reality, and even when St Luke's persuaded him to accept a salary late in his life, he turned the amount over to his struggling venture.¹⁹

However, two other less desirable strands to Muhlenberg's personality also emerge from a survey of his career, traits that were to seriously affect the community of sisters he founded, and which would indirectly contribute to the formation of the Sisters of St. Mary. These might be described as a certain lack of stability, unfortunately coupled with a lack of accountability. Although his father died when Muhlenberg, the eldest of three children, was eleven years of age, his family was comfortably provided for and he always enjoyed substantial means. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he studied for the ministry privately under Jackson Kemper, who was to remain a lifelong friend, and served his diaconate as assistant to Bishop White. Ordained priest in October 1820, two months later, at age twenty four, he was elected co-rector of St. James', Lancaster. Although reportedly an attractive and charming man, he was never to marry, but retained the loyalty of a few significant women throughout his life: his mother accompanied him to Flushing, his sister financed and continued to support the Church of the Holy Communion, and Anne Ayres, a friend of his sister's, accompanied him from that church to St. Luke's and later to St. Johnland, remaining with him until his death in 1877.

Throughout his life, then, Muhlenberg was used to a privileged lifestyle. Accustomed to wielding authority from an early age, he seems always to have attracted a loyal following not only from women but also from among the boys in whose lives he had figured so prominently at Flushing and College Point. As with so many charismatic leaders, however, many of his projects failed when his direct leadership was withdrawn and his personality no longer held sway. Muhlenberg did not appear to be concerned with the long term survival of his projects: after passionately pursuing them until they became a reality, he seems to have quickly lost interest with the day to day problems of institutional management, and to have become absorbed with his next dream. The cost of this, in terms of other people's livelihoods—their careers and incomes and security—seems not to have been a consideration for him. He seldom left in place organisational structures which would enable his projects to survive after his departure: it is a matter of conjecture whether he drew some satisfaction

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 259

from the fact that institutions, which flourished under his personal care, almost universally foundered upon his withdrawal.

As stated above, all of these characteristics would have a bearing not only on the ill-starred Sisters of the Holy Communion, but also on the Sisters of St. Mary. Muhlenberg brought to his foundations some organisational experience, a taste for variety and novelty, a broad if idiosyncratic catholicity, and a commitment to the poor, combined with a recurrent restlessness, a lack of interest in the mundane, and little thought for permanence or continuity.

Muhlenberg and the Sisters of the Holy Communion

At the end of his first year at the Church of the Holy Communion, Dr. Muhlenberg privately received the commitment of Anne Ayres as the first Sister of the Holy Communion. On Saint Luke's Day, 1846, Muhlenberg announced to his congregation that half of the collection that day would be dedicated to the building of his projected Church Hospital. Barely a year after the Church opened its doors, already Muhlenberg was planning his next project. Although it would be seven years before another woman would join the 'Order', both Muhlenberg and Ayres assert that from the beginning the intention was to organise earnest Christian women into devoting their lives to ministering to the sick, especially the poor, as the workforce of a projected Church Hospital²⁰. Not surprisingly, Muhlenberg regarded the Sisters as another means of contributing to his lifelong concern for the underprivileged. Repeatedly, Muhlenberg, and Ayres, made clear that the purpose of a Protestant sisterhood was work. While he allowed that Roman Catholic sisters like the Sisters of Charity performed good deeds, much of their time was taken up with "onerous rounds of ceremonies and devotions"; Protestant Sisters, however, were "devoted to works of charity as the service of their lives".²¹ Ayres was to appeal for more sisters by pointing to the work that was being neglected: "Look at the quantity of work waiting for some of us to do ...".²² Muhlenberg was correct: this shared focus of the founders on the *work* of the community was distinctly Protestant, or at least opposed a Catholic perception of the purpose of religious life. The earliest exemplars of religious life, the desert monks and nuns, fled society in order to concentrate on personal sanctification. While later

²⁰ W. A. Muhlenberg, *Sketch of the History of St Luke's Hospital, from The Pastor's Report of 1871, Evangelical Catholic Papers*, op. cit., p.140

²¹ W. A. Muhlenberg, "Protestant Sisterhoods," *Evangelical Catholic Papers*, op. cit., p. 204

²² A. Ayres, *Evangelical Sisterhoods*, as quoted, A. Skardon, op. cit., p. 128

Rules were to retain this ‘ascetic’ element, they were also to add a ‘mystical’ element, an emphasis on union with God. Most religious orders pursued some variation on the “mixed life”, a mixture of contemplation with a form of ministry, but the importance of the ‘ascetic’ and ‘mystical’ dimensions was still acknowledged. While Roman Catholic communities were frequently founded to undertake specific works, the Rule they adopted had to be approved by ecclesiastical authority, and for centuries religious life had been subjected to scrutiny and legislation. An essential element in every Rule was the transformation of the individual: one of the vows taken by Benedictines, for example, is that of *conversio morum*, a commitment to a lifelong process of conversion. To a Catholic mind, the work of an institute was always to be held in tension with the perfection of its members. In their focus on the work to be done, Muhlenberg and Ayres not only demonstrated a peculiarly Protestant mentality, but they also sowed the first seed of their foundation’s destruction.

It is curious that associated with every one of Muhlenberg’s undertakings, he envisaged the formation of some sort of religious community. At Flushing Institute he had intended to erect ‘Cadet’s Hall’ as a military-type college for training missionaries, to be organised along vaguely monastic lines. At the Church of the Holy Communion he began the Sisters of the Holy Communion, intended for the work at St. Luke’s but occupied for years in the Holy Communion parish infirmary and dispensary. At St. Johnland, he foresaw the formation of “The Christian Brothers of St. Johnland”, comprising young men destined for teaching or the ministry. As far as they were described, all of these communities, whether real or imagined, shared some common characteristics. Pre-eminently they were to have no binding vows: no pledge of perseverance, no permanent commitment to celibacy, no submission of will in obedience. In his pamphlet, *Protestant Sisterhoods*, Muhlenberg specified that there should be no constraint on the members, from without or within, in order to achieve perpetuity. He posits that charity should be the only binding force of a community, and should the spirit of charity fail, the community should immediately dissolve. Curiously, Muhlenberg considers this the hallmark of “a truly Gospel Sisterhood”.²³ He does not consider forgiveness, reconciliation, on-going conversion, self-abnegation, submission to authority or any of the other time-honoured remedies of the Christian tradition and of the religious life in particular. For Muhlenberg, when people fail to get along, they should simply walk away and move on to something different. This rational appears to have

²³ *ibid.*, p. 206

informed much of Muhlenberg's own activities. Unfortunately this expectation would prove to be another seed of destruction.

Muhlenberg was particularly opposed to any concept of a female religious superior: he specifically rejected any concept of "woman-power" in the Church: "the less they have of the means of worldly influence the better. Let this be understood, and any fears or jealousies of a woman-power in the Church, which in fact would be a priestly power, will have no place."²⁴ He would have no truck with "abbesses, lady superiors, and everything of that sort".²⁵ In other words, Muhlenberg enjoyed authority by virtue of his priesthood. The obedience of the Sisters was 'ordered' by God, hence there was no need for any supplementary vows or promises of obedience, nor a need for any superior other than Muhlenberg himself. Accustomed to attaining his own objectives through a combination of family money, personal magnetism, undisputed integrity and earnest philanthropy, he expected others to follow him by virtue of his priesthood and his personality. While Muhlenberg was content to focus his energies and attention on the infant foundation, this might suffice, but given his inability to stay at any task for any length of time, this lack of structure did not bode well for the foundation's survival.

After the Sisterhood began to attract members, the women first moved into a rented tenement behind the church and then into their own house in 1856, the year that Harriet Starr Cannon was received as a probationary member. From here they would set out on their appointed tasks of teaching, nursing and parish visitation. In preparation for the opening of St. Luke's Hospital in 1858, the Sisters, now numbering four, moved uptown, where they were joined by Dr. Muhlenberg the following year. It could not be said that at this stage there was any "Rule": Muhlenberg appears more eloquent in spelling out what the Sisters were *not*, rather than providing any comprehensive vision of who they *were*. What was referred to as a 'Rule' was more a daily regimen, characterised by hard work. There was no recitation of the Office and, curiously for Muhlenberg, no devotional exercises, simply Morning and Evening Prayer. Holy Communion was celebrated regularly. Given the needs of the infirmary and later the hospital, care of the sick occupied much of every day. Personal visitors were not allowed for the Sisters during working hours or at any time on Sundays. A four week vacation was allowed each year, and recreation permitted in those hours that were not accounted for. Although the routine was arduous, the satisfaction of

²⁴ W. A. Muhlenberg, *Protestant Sisterhoods*, Evangelical Catholic Papers, op. cit., p. 208

²⁵ *ibid.*

achieving a long term goal, the worthiness of the work itself and the support of Muhlenberg all appear to have been sources of satisfaction.

The familiarity of the women's relationship with Muhlenberg needs to be remembered when assessing his influence on them. Being unmarried, it was customary for Muhlenberg to take his breakfast with the sisters at 6.30 am, immediately after morning prayer. Not constrained by the customs of established religious houses, there was no rule of silence, thus providing the opportunity for Muhlenberg and the sisters to know each other well.²⁶ Further, after the move to St. Luke's, priest and sisters worked and lived in the one building, constantly seeing and interacting with one another. The building was purposefully constructed so that all wards opened on to the chapel, in order that music, the sounds of the service, and Muhlenberg's preaching could penetrate every corner. A growing friendship between Muhlenberg and Sister Harriet was almost inevitable: they shared a love of music, and he was known to compose pieces and accompany her while she sang. Whether this contributed to Sister Anne Ayres' increasingly autocratic behaviour is a matter of conjecture, but clearly the atmosphere had deteriorated significantly by the end of 1862. Not having any promise of obedience and with no designated leader besides Muhlenberg himself, the Sisters resented Ayres' assuming direction of the community. St. Luke's was now established and running smoothly: it seems likely that Muhlenberg began to withdraw his time and attention from the community around this time, as within a year he was to purchase the site on Long Island Sound for St. Johnland. Sister Anne may have attempted to fill the vacuum left by his shift of focus, and found herself unequal to the task. The issue that proved decisive was the desire expressed by some sisters to conform to a more regular conventual regimen: whether perceived as a threat to her authority or as an unacceptably Roman tendency, Anne Ayres felt compelled to resign. When Muhlenberg learned of this development, he summarily disbanded the Sisterhood and installed Ayres as hospital matron. Although Muhlenberg appears to have been happy for any Sisters who wished to remain to do so, on April 9th, 1863, Ayres ordered her erstwhile sisters off the property. The timing of the Sisters' complaints corresponded closely with the Proclamation of War against the Confederacy on April 15th and the departure of the Seventh Regiment of New York's National Guard four days later.²⁷ In a society swirling with debate about the liberty and rights of individuals versus bodies corporate,

²⁶ Sr. Hilary, op. cit.

²⁷ see L C Lewis (ed), *A History of the Parish of Trinity Church in the City of New York*, Columbia University Press 1950, p. 47

the perceived threat posed by the dissident Sisters may have taken on unforeseen dimensions and precipitated drastic measures. Muhlenberg disregarded appeals to intervene. From his perspective, Muhlenberg was acting according to principle. Clearly charity had ceased to be the binding spirit among the community and so, according to the principles of his 1852 defence of Protestant Sisterhoods, the sisterhood had already dissolved itself: “As the spontaneous product of charity, they will thrive just as the spirit of charity continues to be their indwelling spirit. Their corruption will lead to their dissolution.”²⁸

Although Ayres was to maintain Muhlenberg’s confidence and the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion was resuscitated within three years, the relationship between Muhlenberg and Harriet Starr Cannon and those Sisters who would form the nucleus of the Community of St. Mary was severed at this point. As indicated above, the elements that eventually conspired to destroy the foundation were present all along, implicit within Muhlenberg’s idiosyncratic perception of a Protestant Sisterhood. He had set himself as sole authority and made no provision for his inevitable ennui with the details of administration. He had created a situation where strong personalities were left to struggle for either dominance or accommodation, but had not anticipated the need for means by which differences could be aired, disagreements could be resolved, failures acknowledged, personal agendae subordinated or reconciliation achieved. His static theory of personality revealed little concept of on-going personal sanctification or conversion, growth in virtue or holiness, or however else one chooses to express the process by which individuals acknowledge their personal failings, attempt to change their behaviour, inculcate new habits and increasingly rely on spiritual resources. If fundamentally people did not change, then it was logical for Muhlenberg to emphasise the work they were to do rather than focus on any personal growth, to focus on what they do rather who they are, or could become. This attitude was to have remarkably callous consequences: after spending years in daily contact with Muhlenberg, undertaking difficult and often dangerous work in serving his projects—his parish, his hospital—Harriet Starr Cannon and her companions were turned out on to the street without thanks or recompense. It was the work of a few hours, and at no stage did Muhlenberg demonstrate any solicitude for their welfare. Although Sister Harriet returned the day after her dismissal in an attempt to

²⁸ W. A. Muhlenberg, “Protestant Sisterhoods,” *Evangelical Catholic Papers*, op. cit., p. 206

discuss the situation, neither Muhlenberg nor Ayres would see her. As throughout most of his life, Muhlenberg was accountable to no one.

Sisters of Saint Mary

After a taking a few months to recover, the women ousted from St. Luke's regrouped and undertook the first of a series of works that Muhlenberg would have fully endorsed. Dr. Peters, rector of St. Michael's, Bloomingdale, and a close friend of Muhlenberg, accepted their offer to oversee the House of Mercy, a foundation for destitute girls. A little over a year later, in the fall of 1864, the women were to accept charge of another parish venture, the Sheltering Arms. Described as a careful man "whose most outstanding trait was prudence"²⁹ Dr Peters was as anxious as the small community of women were that their status be regularised as far as possible by the bishop. Bishop Potter in turn appointed a committee of five clergymen of significantly different churchmanship to report on the proposed Sisterhood. The Reverend Dr. Coxe of Calvary Church was known to be totally opposed to Sisterhoods, while Dr. Littlejohn of Holy Trinity, Brooklyn, was "against anything savouring of a Romanish flavour, though he thought that women's work should be properly systematised".³⁰ Morgan Dix, rector of Trinity Church, and Dr. Tuttle of St. Luke's, were known to be supportive of the Anglo-Catholic movement. Dr. Peters provided the bridge between the parties: indubitably Evangelical, he endorsed Muhlenberg's original conception of a sisterhood based on the Lutheran Deaconesses of Kaisersworth, combining "a maximum of work combined with just as small a modicum of sentiment might be drawn as was possible for the weak nature of the gentler sex".³¹ Whatever reservations Dr. Peters may have had, the women were currently providing a staffing solution to his parish's needs. The Committee was able to favourably report to the bishop, recommending that he recognise the foundation, approve a suitable habit, and that "the work of a sister be not limited but held to include all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy which a woman may perform; and that the idea as well of a contemplative life of prayer and devotion as of an active life be included in the office".³² This first statement of the purpose of the new Sisterhood bears all the marks of a compromise, with the Evangelicals' emphasis on work countered by the Catholics' insistence on the contemplative life and mention of devotion.

²⁹ Sr. Hilary, *op cit.*,

³⁰ CSM Archives, Vol. 1, *Annals of the Sisterhood of Mary*, p.25

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, p.26

Perhaps unconsciously, the clergymen also managed to articulate a more or less exact summation of the “mixed life” that Roman Catholic religious orders had been pursuing for centuries. Bishop Potter decided on the name for the new Sisterhood and determined that he would receive the women’s Profession at St. Michael’s on February second, the Feast of the Purification, 1865.

Dr. Peters was to find himself in an increasingly difficult situation. While he valued the work that the Sisters were undertaking in his parish, and had even vacated his own home for their use, over the next few years he was forced to defend himself against attacks from his own parishioners, among others, over the very idea of a Sisterhood. At the same time, he was becoming more and more out of sympathy with the direction the Sisters were taking: like his friend Muhlenberg, he had only ever wanted a truly Protestant organization. When the City Mission Board seemed likely to withdraw funding from a major project because of the “extravagancies of its administrators”, Peters let the Sisters know their services were no longer required. Once again they found themselves turned out on to the street by the unilateral decision of a priest. Dr. Peters installed a Miss Hulm, who had spent a brief period with the Sisters of St. Mary before fleeing their ‘Romanizing germs’, who concurred with his desire for a genuinely Protestant Sisterhood. Together they initiated the Sisters of the Good Shepherd: the annals of the Sisters of St. Mary of January 1871 tersely note “ ... at the present writing it numbers two members ...”³³

Dr. Tuttle, who had been appointed chaplain in the summer of 1864, soon found the journey from Hudson Street to the upper West Side exhausting. The House of Mercy was on Bloomingdale Road, now Riverside Drive, near Eighty Sixth Street, the Sheltering Arms on Ninety Ninth Street. In 1865 the horse car turned back downtown at Fifty Ninth Street, leaving the visitor to walk the final two miles uptown.³⁴ Dr. Tuttle resigned in 1866, on the first anniversary of the Sisters’ profession, and after some negotiating, Bishop Potter appointed Morgan Dix the new pastor.

Morgan Dix

The name of the Sisters’ new pastor indicated his social pedigree, related as he was to Congressman Morgan, a vestryman at Trinity Church from 1845 to 1849, on his mother’s side. His paternal grandfather Colonel Timothy Dix, a Quaker, had sent his son John, Morgan’s father, to a Roman Catholic

³³ CSM Annals, p.41

³⁴ see Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, *Ten Decades of Praise, The Story of the Community of Saint Mary during its first century, 1865-1965* Racine, Wis.: De Koven Foundation, 1965, p. 30

College in Montreal to learn French and experience another culture. John served as an ensign during the war of 1812, retired from the Army in 1828, became Adjutant General in New York State in 1830, Secretary of State in 1833, a member of the State legislature in 1841, Senator from New York State in 1845, Postmaster for New York State in 1860, Secretary for the Treasury in 1861, Major General during civil war, Minister to the Court of Napoleon in 1866, and Governor of New York in 1872. He was also a vestryman at Trinity from 1850 to 1879.³⁵ Morgan was born on All Saints' Day, 1827, and spent much of his boyhood in Albany, where his family attended St. Peter's parish. The boy formed an attachment to the rector, Horatio Potter, who became a close family friend. In 1842 the Dix family moved to New York City; Morgan attended Columbia, and in 1849 commenced his studies for the ministry at the General Theological Seminary.

Even before undertaking theological studies, it seems that Dix had been strongly influenced by the Oxford movement: volume five of the annals of Trinity Church, commissioned by his son, John, in his capacity as chief warden of Trinity, state that "as his Columbia diaries show, he was a convinced disciple of the Tractarians in matters of faith and practice".³⁶ Although General had been investigated, and cleared, by a committee from the House of Bishops in 1844 for its Roman tendencies, it is safe to assume that Dix' seminary formation would have done little to discourage his interest in the Catholic movement. Ordained in May of 1853 for St. Mark's in Philadelphia, he resigned less than a year later: when the rector, Dr. Wilmer, had felt compelled on principle to refuse the gift of an altar cloth from some parishioners, the clerk and two members of the vestry tendered their resignations. Dix tactfully withdrew from the fracas. The following month, April of 1854, he embarked on a leisurely family tour of Europe. Finding himself in Italy late in 1854, he rushed down to Rome to witness the Definition of the Immaculate Conception. Finally returning to New York in May 1855, he found he had been elected to two positions, as rector of St. Peter's, Albany, and as assistant minister at Trinity. He chose the latter. Seven years later, in 1862, he succeeded Dr. Berrian as rector and quickly established himself as one of the leaders of a new version of High Church party in New York: as his biographer described it, the "loyal Churchmanship to which he dedicated himself was that of John Henry Hobart, enriched by the beauty and the color of a ceremonial that never had interested

³⁵ L C Lewis (ed), op. cit., p.13

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.21

his great predecessor".³⁷ Dix was to remain rector of Trinity until his death in 1908.

The Trinity parish annals assert that three significant features emerge from an analysis of Dix's record at Trinity, namely a love of warmth and colour in ceremonial worship that he derived from the Oxford Movement, secondly a strong urge to bring the Gospel to the less favoured members of the community demonstrated by "missionary centers for their religious and physical service", and thirdly "a militant interest in the establishment of Religious Communities".³⁸ Certainly Trinity under Dix became synonymous with Catholic worship: no parishioner there needed fear that the gift of an altar cloth might be refused. The annals recall that "The choir was vested in cottas, the altar decorated in flowers and candles, the priests were again clad in their traditional robes, churchly music was revived and the Order of the Eucharist was reverently observed. Daily celebrations of the Holy Communion were held"³⁹.

Further, despite, or perhaps because of, his privileged upbringing, Dix displayed a consistent commitment to the city's poor and deprived. During his term as an assistant minister, the number of unemployed in New York had reached almost 40,000: in 1857, Trinity established an outreach centre on the Bowery to provide food and counselling to needy families. In the midst of the 1863 draft riots, when Dix learned of an impending attack on St. John's Chapel, where African-Americans attended school, he obtained the protection of Federal Troops for the chapel and those who attended it. During the war years, he participated in a significant ecumenical venture in the city which saw leading ministers preaching in each other's pulpits: Dix preached on Christian Unity to a congregation of 2,000 people at Broadway Baptist Tabernacle. In 1866 the parish's first free chapel, St Chrysostom's, was opened, the name itself suggesting Dix's grounding in the Oxford movement. In 1879 the parish established a Mission House to oversee its growing list of social programs, including a girls' vocational school, a home for aging women, cooking and nutrition classes for immigrant women, a workingman's club, a relief bureau to counsel the sick and the jobless. A new Mission House was built in 1888 and enlarged in 1896.⁴⁰

³⁷ *ibid*, p.42

³⁸ *ibid*, p.42

³⁹ *ibid*, p.43

⁴⁰ for these and other details, see Gerald J. Barry, *Trinity Church: 300 years of Philanthropy*, New York, Hundred Year Association of New York, c.1997

Finally, Dix appears to have been not only an advocate of Anglican Religious Orders, but to have been immediately entranced with the Sisterhood of Saint Mary. Although initially the Sisters feared Dix considered them “a bother, with little confidence in us”⁴¹, he was to become the chief advisor to the sisters “in all matters that concerned the welfare of the community” and Mother Harriet was later to consider “the greatest cross that had ever come to the sisters and herself was the loss which came from the withdrawal of Dr. Dix from our spiritual leadership”.⁴²

Shortly after he assumed direction of the Sisters, Dix published a Book of the Hours, which was assessed by the *Church Journal* as “a Jesuit device, to put into the hands of our Romanizing ritualists, a formula of devotion which shall foster and feed the taste for Litanies and Liturgies”, “mawkish and idolatrous”, filled with “half disguised Romanism” and “nauseating allusions to the Virgin Mary”. The Journal determined that “never before has the Rector of Trinity so alienated the whole Evangelical party from himself”.⁴³ Up until this time, the Sisters had been following the St. Luke’s custom of reciting Morning and Evening Prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Sisters promptly adopted the Book of the Hours, although it was noted that immediately after it was first used at vespers at the Sheltering Arms, the roof fell in and serious injury was narrowly avoided.⁴⁴ In addition to celebrating Mass in the Sisters’ oratory once a week, Dix also undertook regular monthly visits to say vespers with the sisters and to offer an instruction on the religious life. Some of these instructions reveal a substantial grasp of the principles of the religious life, gathered from a variety of sources. Topics included such fundamentals as *Obedience, Intention, Devotion, Holy Communion, Temptation, Conduct after Faults, Of the Superior, Of Companions, and Order of the House*.⁴⁵ Although they now appear somewhat stolid in style and elementary in character, the fact that they were collected and later published by the Sisters suggests that they answered a significant need. These women had no theological education and little training in the religious life except for the idiosyncratic perceptions and practices of Dr. Muhlenberg. Anxious to learn, they had set themselves to study whatever they could find on religious life⁴⁶, an approach never guaranteed to

⁴¹ letter of Sister Jane to Mr. Baker, as quoted, Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, op. cit., p.26

⁴² preface, author unknown, to Rev Morgan Dix, *Instructions on the Religious Life*, CSM 1909, p.9

⁴³ as quoted, *Annals*, CSM, p.37-8

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ Morgan Dix, *Instructions on the Religious Life*, CSM, 1909

⁴⁶ Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, op. cit., p.43

achieve an effective synthesis. Dix's oversight and guidance prevented an excess of the eclecticism that was to characterise some of the English foundations.

Perhaps the most significant contribution made by Dr. Dix was his writing the first Rule of the Sisterhood. The fact that he presented them with this Rule on April 4th 1866, just two months after his appointment as chaplain, may indicate that both he and the Sisters considered it a matter of some urgency. It may also explain its rather rudimentary nature. Dix envisioned an 'inner rule', addressing the "life of the soul in Christ", as well as an 'external rule', concerned with "certain outward and visible matters of order, service and discipline".⁴⁷ Clearly Dix's subsequent 'Instructions' were originally designed as expositions of the Rule, as many topics were identical. The Rule grouped regulations around such headings as *Of Intention, Of Devotion, Holy Communion, In Temptation, After a Fault, Of the Superior, Of Companions, Order of the House, Employment, In the Work, In Recreation, Intercourse with the Outer World*.⁴⁸ Although these headings may appear to be relatively comprehensive, there were some significant deficiencies. The individual instructions gathered under the headings were extremely basic: *Of Devotion*, for example, contains such directions as "Have a set time for private devotions" and "Be punctual at chapel". The Rule is characterised by a focus on details, providing a handy guide to beginners in the religious life but offering little to the more proficient. The section which deals with the Superior, for example, spells out the obedience, deference and respect due to that office, but does not address the Superior's obligations to her subjects or provide any principles by which she should govern her own behaviour. Given the experience of the Sisters at St. Luke's, this was a potentially disastrous omission. Further, apart from obedience, the Rule is a little shy of dealing directly with the other two evangelical counsels of poverty and chastity, and neither is treated as a positive form of dedication. Chastity, for example, seems to be equated with celibacy, simply a state of not being married. Poverty was not so much an aspiration as an everyday predicament for the Sisters. Perhaps because they were unquestioned, these fundamental expressions of the religious life were largely untreated. However, these women had undertaken an extremely difficult lifestyle, with some of its most difficult

⁴⁷ unpublished Notes on the Rule, CSM, undated

⁴⁸ The details of the first two Rules are taken from an early Sister's manuscript copy, which includes Dr. Dix's Rule written on the facing pages of a diary, with Fr. Benson's later revisions noted on the opposite pages. CSM archives.

aspects not given positive explanation. Nevertheless, Dix supported and encouraged the movement of the community towards more traditional observances, with increasing value being placed on silence, reading and recollection.⁴⁹

Although Dix was chaplain to the Sisters for only eight years, they may have been the most crucial years of the community's life. His warm personal relationship with Bishop Potter allowed him to smooth over problems as they arose, and Bishop Potter probably allowed Dix a degree of trust and latitude granted to few other clergymen: when Potter became incensed that the Sisters had invited Fr. Benson of the Cowley Fathers to preach their 1870 Advent retreat, Potter icily reminded them that "none of these English Clergymen are yet licensed to officiate in this Diocese, and they will not be except *on the condition of conforming rigidly to the recognized usages*—no coloured vestments—no extraordinary demonstrations at the Holy Eucharist—no hearing of confessions in the technical sense—no attempt to form any order of fraternity in this diocese—no use of terms or language, *native* to a foreign Church, but not generally familiar in this Church. I had nothing to do with inviting these gentlemen here, and I will not allow them to disturb us with another sensation."⁵⁰ Mother Harriet sent word to Dix, who immediately left his parents' dinner table and rushed to reassure Potter. The retreat began, as scheduled, the following evening.⁵¹ Dix was unapologetic in his High Church convictions, and as rector of the city's pre-eminent church, he had little to fear from his critics. His uncompromising churchmanship provided stability and consistency during the community's formative years.

The level of trust between Dix and the Sisters, Mother Harriet in particular, is difficult to overemphasise. Like Muhlenberg, he took meals with the Sisters when he was present and got to know each Sister individually.⁵² He supported them in every way, receiving their life professions privately at a time when this was not permissible publicly, celebrated Mass for them, heard their confessions, instructed them, guided them, protected them from their critics and financially contributed to their every project. Perhaps the clearest gauge of the depth of their attachment was the rapidity with which their relationship was severed. It had been widely assumed that Dix, like many High Churchmen, had taken a private vow of celibacy. The fact that in 1872, at the age of 45, he had

⁴⁹ Sr. Hilary CSM, op. cit., VI:22

⁵⁰ Letter, Bp. H. Potter to Mother Harriet, 11/22/1870, CSM archives

⁵¹ Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, op. cit., p.77

⁵² Sr. Hilary CSM, op. cit., VI:23

delivered *Lectures on the two estates: that of the wedded in the Lord, and that of the single for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake*, might conceivably have led his audience to deduce that he had chosen the latter over the former, although Dix never stated that this was the case.⁵³ When in late 1873 rumours began to circulate that he had become engaged, Mother Harriet dismissed them. Dix, however, confirmed in mid-January 1874 that a few weeks earlier he had proposed marriage to Miss Emily Woolsey. In a meeting that Mother Harriet was to describe as “most distressing and agonising”, she and Dr Dix agreed to what appears more of a justification than an explanation for their parting company: his parish duties and domestic obligations would not allow him to continue as their pastor.⁵⁴ This was particularly awkward as the Sisters were committed to a new venture in Trinity parish and there could be no clean break. The sisters were described as being “grieved, indignant, betrayed”, Dr. Dix “astonished and dismayed”.⁵⁵ For his part, Dix remained constant in his support of Mother Harriet, sending her a silver crucifix on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her of reception into the Sisters of the Holy Communion,⁵⁶ and writing a memoir after her death. Mother Harriet and the Sisters moved quickly to distance themselves from Dix’ legacy. In 1875 the Sisters voted to discontinue use of Dr Dix’ translation of the breviary; two years later Dix’ Rule was replaced with a revision by Fr. Benson of the Cowley Fathers. While Benson’s changes are often merely stylistic, the Sisters regarded the ‘new’ Rule as finally ending the relationship with Dix.⁵⁷

The similarities and contrasts between Muhlenberg and Dix are significant as foundational influences upon Mother Harriet and the Sisterhood. Both emerged from privileged backgrounds and enjoyed powerful connections, both exhibited considerable leadership skills, both demonstrated a consistent commitment to the poor and disadvantaged. Even though their churchmanship appears discordant, both saw value in enhancing the liturgy aesthetically and established reputations as leaders in ritual embellishment. Both believed that Religious Orders had a legitimate place in the Reformed tradition and utilised Sisters as an integral part of their pastoral strategy. Dix, however, was able to undertake diverse ministries while retaining Trinity as his primary focus; his fifty-

⁵³ Morgan Dix, *Lectures on the two estates: that of the wedded in the Lord, and that of the single for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake*, Pott, Young, New York, 1872

⁵⁴ Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, op. cit., p.81

⁵⁵ Sr. Hilary CSM, op.cit.

⁵⁶ Sr. Hilary CSM, op.cit. VII:14

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

three years of ministry in the one parish stand in marked contrast to Muhlenberg's restlessness. Where Muhlenberg seems to have become bored with the routine details of administration, Dix demonstrated a capacity to quickly establish working guidelines that were intelligible and coherent. A crucial difference between the two is their response to what might be termed a failure in charity. Muhlenberg believed that the law of charity alone should bind a Christian community together, with which few would argue. However, where Muhlenberg reacted to a perceived lack of charity in the Sisterhood by immediately disbanding it, Dix introduced regular confession. Having received a coherently Catholic seminary formation, Dix's theology and ecclesiology and liturgics were of a piece, and would at least partially explain his confidence in the face of criticism and his easy embrace of Catholic practice. Muhlenberg's informal preparation for the ministry at the feet of Jackson Kemper appears to have left him ill prepared to define, sustain or defend any identifiable style of churchmanship.

Harriet Starr Cannon

Perhaps one of the most important keys to understanding Harriet Starr Cannon is the series of losses that left her essentially alone in the world at the age of the age of thirty three. Her parents had died with a day of each other in a yellow fever epidemic in the fall of 1824, when she was only seventeen months of age. She and her only sister were raised by relatives in Bridgeport, Connecticut, until her sister's marriage and subsequent move to California in 1851. Following the death of the uncle in whose house she was living, Miss Cannon moved to Brooklyn in 1853 where she joined the choir of Grace Church and supported herself by teaching music. Another member of the choir, "Charlie" Quintard, was to remain a friend and supporter until death. On the eve of leaving New York to join her sister in California in 1855, she received word that her sister had died. Within months, Miss Cannon was received as a probationer by the Sisters of the Holy Communion.⁵⁸

Equipped only with the level of education then thought appropriate for gentlewomen, without family or fortune, and still suffering the grief of her sister's loss, Miss Cannon's prospects for the future must have appeared bleak. The warmth and security offered by Muhlenberg's welcome, the promise of hard but worthwhile work and the comfort of a religious ambience were powerful incentives to commit herself to the novel community. Her motivation at this stage

⁵⁸ Sr. Hilary CSM, *op. cit.*, pp 9-15

appears largely to bury her grief for her sister in work for the poor: certainly she knew nothing of religious life or convents, which made her an ideal candidate for Muhlenberg's Sisterhood. Like him, she was committed to the poor: the Sisterhood merely formed a framework in which that commitment might be realised. As noted above, the focus of the Sisterhood was work, uninterrupted by the round of prayers and devotions of Roman Catholic religious. While neither Muhlenberg nor Ayres were capable of moving beyond their preconceptions of a 'Protestant Sisterhood', they did introduce Miss Cannon to some fundamental realities of the religious life. It may not have occurred to anyone at the Church of Holy Communion, but in the daily recitation of Mattins and Evensong from the Book of Common Prayer, they were resuming the ancient monastic offices of the pre-Reformation Church, that since 1552 had formed the mainstream of Anglican devotional life.⁵⁹ Further, Muhlenberg and Ayres introduced Miss Cannon to a lifestyle, characterised by rules and customs and hard work, that demanded enormous self-discipline and commitment. In the difficult years ahead, this grounding was to prove invaluable. Ayres' personal and administrative deficiencies were also powerful learning experiences for Miss Cannon and for those women who subsequently joined the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion. Their experience of Miss Ayres leadership was so negative that, even after they had regathered as the Sisters of St. Mary, they demonstrated a marked reluctance to elect a leader or settle on a title for her; not until September of 1865 was Sister Harriet elected Superior.

Despite Muhlenberg's ultimate disregard of her, his influence on Harriet Starr Cannon should not be underestimated. The first works that the new Sisterhood undertook—delinquent girls at the House of Mercy, orphans at the Sheltering Arms, homeless women and children at St. Barnabas' House—all reflected Muhlenberg's priorities and his agenda for the now defunct Sisterhood of the Holy Communion.⁶⁰ One of the first tasks in each new undertaking was the creation of an oratory or chapel where vintage Muhlenberg flourishes appeared: the community recorded that shortly after moving into the House of Mercy, the Sisters desired their own chapel "in which might be conducted services as would at once attract the imaginations and excite the devotions of all their charges".⁶¹ Despite his confusing churchmanship, Muhlenberg certainly awoke in Sister Harriet a taste for ritual, and shared with her his passion for

⁵⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1996, p.511

⁶⁰ The Sisterhood, revived under Ayres, formally ended with her death in 1896.

⁶¹ Sr. Hilary CSM, *op. cit.*, p.14

aesthetically enriching the worship of the Church. Coupled with this was his own concept of the catholicity of the church: he introduced her to beliefs and experiences that were shaking the foundations of the Anglican world.

Just as significant, however, were Sister Harriet's departures from Muhlenberg's opinions and preferences. Where Muhlenberg had insisted on the Sisters of the Holy Communion being attired in the plain dress of a gentlewoman, it was not long before the Sisters of St. Mary began adopting distinctive touches to their garb. Dr. Peters' defence of the Sisters in the Spring of 1867, contained in his report to the board of the House of Mercy, notes "I have never thought it worth while to notice any fancies pleasing to themselves regarding their inexpensive dress. If they had paraded around here in silks, satins and jewelry, or in any demoralizing style of costume, as very low necks and short sleeves, I might remonstrate. I do not like the dress, but that is as said a question, in my view, of taste. They do wear a cord and tassel around their waist, indicating, as a visitor told me they informed her, that the sisters were bound together in loving accord. They wear crosses, but no bleeding heart. Some of the Sisters longest in the service have a lily or some other flower in silver on the cross. I believe it indicates a grade in the Sisterhood. No crucifixes are used in the house, excepting anything which may be in the Sisters' rooms, and there, of course, I do not go The only exceptions as to crucifixes in the old house were my own, given to me by a friend, a Presbyterian Missionary, who brought it from Jerusalem." ⁶²

More significant, however, was the freedom which Muhlenberg's and Ayres' absence afforded. In 1865, before Dix was appointed, Sister Harriet found herself superior of a group of Sisters, and, somewhat belatedly perhaps, "assumed her new role by setting about to acquire some knowledge of the religious life". ⁶³ Sister Harriet, accompanied by Sister Sarah, travelled south to Baltimore to visit the newly established Sisters of the Good Shepherd. The trip appears to have been largely disappointing. Although they brought back with them a set of instructions for postulants written by the Sisters' chaplain, it was hardly a departure from what they had been accustomed to at St. Luke's: after an introduction, the instructions begin "Monday. My dear child, The working days of the week have opened. Work; work; It is a wonderful law, the law of work. Every one must work, there is no escape from it."⁶⁴ More substantial fare

⁶² Sr. Hilary CSM, op cit., V: 17-18

⁶³ Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, op. cit., p.43

⁶⁴ Rev Charles W. Rankin, *Rules and Counsels for the Probationers in the Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd*, Baltimore, manuscript, undated

was provided by St Teresa's *Interior Castle* and, later, her *Foundations*: perhaps Sister Harriet's first significant lessons in the religious life were distilled from the great Carmelite reformer, and her copies of these books bear her frequent underlinings. Her choice of reading material may or may not have been endorsed by Muhlenberg, but certainly any attempt to emulate the way of life it describes would have been discouraged.

The link with the Baltimore Sisters was to prove providential in a number of ways. Their superior, Sister Catherine, enlisted Sister Harriet in a planned voyage to England to study Anglican convents. Although Sister Catherine withdrew, Sister Harriet sailed without her and in the course of four months visited the All Saints' Sisters, Margaret Street, London, the Sisterhood of St Margaret at East Grinstead, the Community of St John the Baptist at Clewer, the Sisters of the Poor at Shoreditch, and Ascot Priory, where she was received by the Lady Abbess, the unparalleled Mother Lydia Sellon.⁶⁵ She returned to New York in September of 1867.

Each of these communities was to have an impact on the Sisters of St. Mary: not only did Sister Harriet bring back her own experiences and observations, but she was to send Sister Sarah, her Baltimore companion, to England for an abridged novitiate in 1875-76. She was also to make contact with the Boston born Father Grafton, one of the founders of the Society of St. John the Baptist, who was to provide a significant source of guidance and support in the years ahead. In Fr. Grafton's estimation, All Saints was the "most perfectly organized novitiate in England", which settled any questions as to where Sister Sarah's novitiate was to be spent.⁶⁶ Founded as a nursing order by another Mother Harriet (Brownlow), the All Saints' community had adopted a Rule based on Saint Augustine's, with emphasis on silence, spiritual reading, intercessions and meditation.⁶⁷ All Saints consciously imitated the Visitation Sisters, founded by St Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal at Annecy in 1610, and there were similarities that would have appealed to Sister Harriet, even Muhlenberg. St Frances de Sales had not wanted enclosure or vows for his Sisters, but rather a contemplative life in which the visitation of the sick poor was conducted as an act of devotion. His ideas were too radical for Rome, which imposed the Rule of St. Augustine and enclosure on the community, but de Sales still managed to mould the end result. Widows as well

⁶⁵ CSM archives, p.43.

⁶⁶ CSM archives

⁶⁷ Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Cloister, Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion*, SPCK, London, 1964, p.325

as virgins were welcome to join the community, including the aged and sick, and the Rule was deliberately mitigated to be mild and simple. It was an attractive and relatively gentle approach to the religious life.⁶⁸

Another community which adopted St Frances de Sales' original idea was St Margaret's, East Grinstead. Their founder, John Mason Neale, had transcribed large sections of de Sales' Rule, as it read before Rome amended it, as the purpose of his order was the visitation of the sick poor in their cottages. Dr. Neale was a champion of the Oxford Movement: he had once been inhibited by his bishop for having a bible with a cross on the cover, and a cross and candlesticks on the Communion Table. St. Margaret's liturgy reflected the growing confidence of the Catholic movement: from 1855, he had worn a chasuble for Mass, and St Margaret's had the Sacrament reserved from 1857, and Exposition and Benediction from 1859. Daily, the community recited the Divine Office in choir, using Dr. Neale's translation of the Sarum breviary, supplemented by material from medieval English, Roman, and French sources.⁶⁹ The East Grinstead breviary was adopted by the Sisters of St. Mary in 1876, after they discontinued use of Dr. Dix's translation.⁷⁰

Perhaps because de Sales' original intentions were realised, after a fashion, by St. Vincent de Paul and his Sisters of Charity, both the All Saint's and the St Margaret's communities adopted the flaring linen cornet which was so characteristic of the French Sisters. The cornet was also to be incorporated into the St. Mary's habit. A less visible but perhaps more significant legacy from St. Margaret's was Doctor Neale's *The Virgin's Lamp*.⁷¹ The Preface acknowledges the "Opuscles de S. Francois de Sales, Heures de Nostre Dame, Paris 1541, Gueranger's *Annee Eucharistique*, and a Portuguese book of devotions for Holy Communion which has lost its cover".⁷² The text includes the *Little Hours of the Holy Ghost*, a version of the daily offices, along with a collection of prayers and devotions for various times and occasions. For those Sisters engaged in nursing duties, there are thoughts and texts for every hour of the day. There is also a description of different methods of meditation, including

⁶⁸ "Visitation Nuns", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 14, p.720

⁶⁹ *ibid*, pp 338-346

⁷⁰ Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, *op. cit.*, p.83

⁷¹ Rev J M Neale D.D., *The Virgin's Lamp, Prayers and Devout Exercises for English Sisters*, Riningtons, London 1868

⁷² Rev J M Neale D.D., *op. cit.*, preface

the Ignatian method. This compendium was subsequently to be found in every Sister of St. Mary's collection.⁷³

Relations with the Sisters of St. John the Baptist at Clewer were to remain strong after Sister Harriet's visit, as that community made a foundation in Baltimore in 1874, and contact between the two communities was warm and relatively frequent. Apart from moral support, the Clewer community made an important contribution to the St. Mary's Sisters in the form of what became known as the 'Clewer Manuals', a two-volume, pocket size collection of prayers and devotions compiled by the Rev. Thomas Thellusson Carter. Carter, a committed Tractarian, had founded the Sisters of St John the Baptist in 1851, composing the rule from a variety of sources. The prayers and devotions included in the Manuals, such as *Prayers for Daily Use, for Different Necessities, for Forgiveness of Sins, on the Holy Communion, and Devotions to the Holy Ghost, on the Passion, for the Sick*, are comprehensive, even if they have not dated well. The first prayer for morning, for example, begins "I adore, praise and salute Thee, O most Sweet Heart of Jesus Christ, fresh and gladdening as the breath of spring, from which, as from a fountain of graces, sweeter than the honeycomb, floweth evermore all good and all delight ...".⁷⁴ More importantly, however, they contain Fr. Carter's own translations of the seven daily offices. Thus Sister Harriet was exposed to another version of the monastic offices, and a comprehensive collection of devotions, all completed by an accomplished scholar. Sister Harriet brought a copy of the Manuals back to New York, and for decades afterwards, all Sisters of St. Mary were issued with their own copy.

The Shoreditch Sisters of the Poor were another order founded to nurse the sick poor in London's East End. Like Sister Harriet's original community, one of their principle early works was a hospital foundation. Unlike any of the above communities, however, this community adopted St. Benedict's Rule from its inception, with a mitigated observance initially but always with the intention of full observance in time. Although Matins & Lauds were sung in English, they were the first Anglican community to recite the day hours in Latin, the *Breviarium Monasticum* being used almost from the beginning. True to their Benedictine aspirations, the recitation of Divine Office in choir was

⁷³ CSM archives state that Dr. Seymour, when chaplain of House of Mercy, gave each of the Sisters a copy of Dr. Neale's *Virgin's Lamp* which afterwards they used almost as much as they did their Clewer manuals

⁷⁴ T.T. Carter (ed), *Manual of Devotion for Sisters of Mercy*, MA Longmans Green & Co., London 1908, p 4-5

regarded as “the chief occupation, and never be put aside for anything”.⁷⁵ In 1929, the community were to achieve full observance of the Benedictine Rule, and became affiliated with Nashdom Abbey. Henceforth they were to be known as the Benedictine Community of St Mary at the Cross.

Another Benedictine link was established with Sister Harriet’s visit to Mother Lydia Sellon at Ascot Priory, the home of the Society of the Most Holy Trinity. Mother Lydia had been born on St. Benedict’s day, March 21st, and began her Sisterhood with the singing of first vespers on the feast of Ss Simon and Jude on the afternoon of October 27th 1848. The regular celebration of the Divine Office was to characterise the community thereafter, relying on translations of the Sarum Breviary. Mother Lydia’s Rule reflected the Benedictine Rule on many points, but, like the habit she designed for her Sisters, was an amalgam of different sources, principally the Poor Clares. The daily regimen was characterised by an emphasis on prayer and contemplation. Dr Pusey was closely associated with the Order for over thirty years; after 1864, he customarily spent his summers at the Priory. Although Sister Harriet was at Ascot during the summer, it is not clear whether she met him. Meeting Mother Lydia was no small accomplishment: sometimes described as tyrannical and imperious, she was certainly a legislator. Peter Anson comments that her contemporary Anglican foundresses were “mostly concerned with the immediate jobs which had to be done by their Sisters, and lived from day to day. Some of these communities had at first only the sketchiest of Rules”.⁷⁶ Mother Lydia’s administration, on the other hand, left little to the imagination. If Mother Lydia was to make no other impression on Sister Harriet, it may have been the importance of a comprehensive Rule.

One concrete result of Mother Harriet’s trip to England was the introduction of regular retreats and, in 1870, the Chapter of Faults, a systemic means by which community members could acknowledge personal failure and the need to make amends. To her great credit, she was the first to kneel before her community and confess her faults on the night it was introduced.⁷⁷ Whatever other ideas and impressions Sister Harriet brought back with her, the contents of her suitcase are more easily identifiable: when she returned to New York she distributed among the Sisters the books she had brought back with her, which included *The Paradise of the Christian Soul*, *Sancta Sophia*, *The Spiritual Exercise of Saint Ignatius*, *Rodriguez’ Way of Perfection*, *Select Memoirs*

⁷⁵ see Peter Anson, op. cit., pp 400-403

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.269

⁷⁷ Sr. Hilary CSM, op. cit., VI:22

of *Port Royal* and the *Clewer Manuals*. Most of these works had been standard texts among English recusants: they brought the Saint Mary's community into contact with substantial formative influences on English Catholicism. While the Jesuit input, from St Ignatius and Rodriguez, is 'balanced' by the Benedictine sources, *Sancta Sophia* and *Port Royal*, the impact of the latter texts on the emerging Rule and spirituality of the American Sisters is more immediate and identifiable. In 1876, with the foundation of the Peekskill convent and the transfer there of Mother Harriet and the community's administration, a request for a Mass priest and confessor was sent to Father Benson of the Cowley Fathers in Boston. Fr Henry Martyn Torbert was duly established in the boiler room, and at once commenced a course of instruction based on Fr Augustine Baker's *Sancta Sophia*.

Dom David Augustine Baker, born in 1575, had been a pupil of Christ's Hospital, graduate of Pembroke College, Oxford and a member of the Middle Temple, before being received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1605. In the same year he joined the Benedictine Order at Padua, but was subsequently aggregated to the ancient English Congregation. After undertaking research work in England on behalf of his order, in 1624 he was sent as spiritual director to the newly established convent of English Benedictine nuns at Cambrai. He remained for about nine years, during which time he wrote a number of treatises for the community, collected and copied by Dame Barbara Constable, edited by Dom Serenus Cressy and published in 1657 under the title "Sancta Sophia". In 1633 Baker was removed to Douai, where he wrote a long treatise on the English mission, before being sent to England where he died of the plague in 1641.⁷⁸

Baker's teaching was as controversial in his own lifetime as in the decades following his death—for example, the 1784 English Benedictine Constitutions deliberately excised "concentration on the prayer of affections, desolations and consolations ... which betray the influence of Augustine Baker".⁷⁹ Nonetheless, his influence on Roman Catholic religious life up until the twentieth century is inestimable. One commentator posited that a copy of *Holy Wisdom* could once be found on the library shelves of almost every religious community throughout the English-speaking world.⁸⁰ Clearly it could also be

⁷⁸ cf. Benedictines of Stanbrook, *In a Great Tradition*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1956, pp.4, 22

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Scott, "A Long Exile", Daniel Rees (ed), *Monks of England*, SPCK, London, 1997, p.190

⁸⁰ cf. Benedictines of Stanbrook, op.cit., p.4

found on the library shelves of Anglican religious communities. Baker's work had a multi faceted appeal to Anglican communities: while on one hand it reflected the 'holy wisdom' of one of the oldest religious families and Rules in the Church, it had also emerged from the ancient English Benedictine Congregation, the most senior of all Benedictine congregations, who claimed some sort of continuity from the time of Augustine. The high church movement could not have overlooked that Baker was an Oxford man: further, he wrote in English for an English community of women. Benedictinism was characterised by balanced moderation in all things, an eminently Anglican aspiration. Perhaps the long Benedictine presence in England had also taught the English church to distinguish between that which is necessary for salvation and that which is peripheral: certainly the Benedictines concentrated on the Church's liturgical life and boasted of their freedom from any particular devotions. Where other orders associated themselves with fervour for a Saint or a form of ministry, or promoted distinctive forms of prayer or worship, the Benedictines restricted themselves to the Liturgy of the Hours and the normal sacramental life of the Church, albeit with a warm but restrained Marian devotion.

From Fr Torbert's time onward, the Benedictine tradition, which was implicit in the Offices of the Book of Common Prayer Mother Harriet had used every day as a Sister of the Holy Communion, which she had seen first hand at Shoreditch and read about in *Port Royal*, whose intellectual and spiritual riches she had experienced in the work of Baker and Gueranger, was to powerfully inform the community's life. In 1896, the year of Mother Harriet's death, a new Chaplain was appointed, another Cowley Father, Alfred Langmore. He undertook a complete rewriting of the Rule, incorporating the mandate first given by Bishop Potter and the Dix / Benson instructions, inserting them into an unmistakably Benedictine context. The section dealing with the role of the Superior, for example, advises her to act with prudence when correcting, for fear that in seeking "too eagerly to scrape off the rust the vessel be broken"⁸¹, a direct quotation from Benedict's chapter on the election of an abbot.⁸² Other sections of the Rule betray a characteristic Benedictine temperance, such as "the affections, being God's gifts, are not to be crushed, nevertheless they must be purified and regulated"⁸³, "other communities are called in the wisdom of

⁸¹ 1905 Proposed CSM Rule, p.46 / #199

⁸² Ch. 64:12, *RB 1980 The Rule of St. Benedict*, T. Fry (ed), Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1981, p.283

⁸³ 1905 Proposed CSM Rule, p.17 / #34

God to greater physical asceticism than we”⁸⁴, and once again to the Superior, “in giving obediences be discreet, considerate and merciful.”⁸⁵ However, balance and moderation were not novelties to the community, but rather reflected the beliefs of the earliest members: in 1863, Sr. Jane, before her premature death, wrote “Our rules should be few, simple and as free from unnatural restraint as possible. Love the ruling and underlying principle. I think the great mistake has been too great strictness in things of no moment”⁸⁶

In the shortages following World War I, the Sisters modified their ample Victorian habits along simpler lines and adopted the traditional Benedictine scapular, and one of their most significant contributions to Episcopal Church Life has been the compilation and publication of the *Monastic Diurnal*, which continues to serve as the breviary used by many Episcopal religious orders.

Conclusion

Perhaps what one author has described as “the structures of domination through which their patriarchal culture maintained the subordination of women”⁸⁷ demanded that a group of single Victorian churchwomen secure a strong male clerical protector. Muhlenberg, like his friend Peters, was ultimately incapable of providing this role. Their evangelical churchmanship and commitment to a thoroughly Protestant Sisterhood could not sustain support for the Sisters’ burgeoning Catholic leanings. Muhlenberg had believed that authority over his Sisterhood was a priestly function, which could only reside in an ordained person, not an elected female superior. Combined with the broader ‘patriarchal’ church ethos and Victorian sensibilities about a woman’s proper place, Sister Harriet had few options but to submit. However, the relationship between Sister Harriet and Dr. Muhlenberg was not simply administrative: there was clearly a close friendship that somehow went wrong. Sister Harriet’s transference of allegiance to Dr. Dix was total, and he was to provide the Sisters a level of protection and guidance which few others could have afforded. Once again, however, this was not simply a business arrangement. The closeness with which Dr. Dix and Sister Harriet worked, and her devastating sense of betrayal when he married, argues for strong bonds of friendship between the two. Sister Harriet was never to repeat this experience. Whether by choice or

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p.19 / #42

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p.47 / #202

⁸⁶ letter to Mr Baker, as quoted, Sr. Mary Hilary CSM, *op. cit.*, p.42

⁸⁷ P.W. Darling, *New Wine, The Story of Women Transforming Leadership and Power in the Episcopal Church*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, p.94

circumstance, no priest was to win the degree of confidence and trust she had extended to Muhlenberg and Dix, and authority within the Sisterhood was never again to be perceived as a priestly prerogative. Thereafter, Mother Harriet employed the Cowley Fathers as chaplains, and not until after her death was another cleric, Fr. Langmore, allowed any substantial legislative influence over the Sisters.

In surveying the various sources that shaped the identity of the early Community of St. Mary, it becomes clear that while Muhlenberg and Dix figure prominently in the earliest stages of development, they contributed little to those intellectual and spiritual principles that were to ultimately characterise the Sisterhood. While both composed a “Rule”, they used the word analogously. Compared to the great Rules of the Western Church, theirs were no more than a collection of counsels. Where Muhlenberg provided the fundamental impetus and direction with his commitment to the sick poor and idea of a Sisterhood to serve them, Dix provided stability and protection with his Rule and personal guidance; where Muhlenberg unwittingly launched the Sisterhood into Catholic waters through his liturgical innovations, Dix gave substance and coherence with his Catholic theological integrity. However, it appears that Mother Harriet introduced the depth and richness of a genuine Benedictine monastic tradition to the community. Ironically she achieved this not by positive legislation, along the lines of Mother Lydia at Ascot Priory, but by her personal reading and the sharing of material with her community, and by seeking the involvement of the Cowley Fathers at every opportunity. Where other Anglican communities were patching together Rules and customs and observances from different, even discordant, traditions, Mother Harriet’s instincts appear to have been essentially and coherently monastic. Without Dix and the Cowley Fathers, it is possible that the Order may have become merely eclectic, but the fact that she sought out and recognised reliable advice and experience argues for her prudence.

In seeking an answer to the puzzle of how a Catholic, Episcopal monastic community of Sisters could emerge from essentially Lutheran beginnings, the Sisters of the Holy Communion, Mother Harriet’s influence is clearly pivotal. While not immediately recognisable as a saint or an intellectual, she provided a continuity of sound judgement, practical intelligence and imaginative oversight which enabled her community to formulate a Rule that both encapsulated its origins and articulated a new understanding of its identity.

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