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The Ursulines of Jesus: The First Religious in Post-Reformation Scotland

Abstract

The establishment of St. Margaret's convent in Edinburgh in 1834 was one of the key milestones in the re-establishment of the Catholic Church and Catholic life in Post-Reformation Scotland. The Ursulines of Jesus were the first religious to arrive in Scotland and, in their first fifty years, were to serve the Catholic communities in Edinburgh and Perth in school education, caring for the poor and the sick and ministering to Catholic female prisoners. The story of the foundation and development of the Ursulines is the story of a number of committed and visionary individuals such as Fr. James Gillis and Sister Agnes Xavier Trail who contributed to the transformation of the embryonic Post-Reformation Scottish Catholic Church.

Introduction

The arrival of the first religious orders and congregations to Scotland in the Post-Reformation period initiated a new era in the history of religious life in Scotland. In the period prior to the Reformation, the male religious were more numerous than the female.¹ This was to be reversed with the establishment of religious life in the Post-Reformation Scottish Catholic Church: the female religious were to become more numerous than the male. There was another marked change in that the female religious in the Pre-Reformation era were enclosed and there was greater diversity in the male religious including monks, friars and canons regular. In the Post-Reformation era the female religious were mostly unenclosed and active in a variety of activities, notably school education, pastoral ministry and social welfare. A number of the male and female religious who established houses in Scotland in the mid to late nineteenth century came from France from the context of the revival in religious life in the Post-Revolution period. Others came from Ireland, England, Belgium and Italy. Many of these religious orders and congregations made a significant contribution to Catholic school education and to social welfare and were highly influential in Catholic life in Scotland in the 19th and 20th centuries as the Catholic population grew. One of the greatest contributions was to the training of Catholic teachers. The Notre Dame Sisters opened Notre Dame Teacher Training College in Dowanahill, Glasgow for women in 1895 and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart opened St. Margaret's College in Craiglockhart, Edinburgh in 1920.² The sisters of Notre Dame arrived in Scotland from Mount Pleasant College in Liverpool and had their origins in Namur in Belgium. The Sisters of the Sacred Heart came from England and had their roots in France.

This short article will examine the arrival and the first fifty years of the first group of religious to arrive in Scotland in the Post-Reformation period. The Ursulines of Jesus were the first religious to arrive in Scotland in the Post-Reformation period when they

arrived in Edinburgh in 1834. The article will discuss the variety of ministries adopted by the sisters and some of the challenges faced by the sisters including the threat of convent inspections. This concise account of the Ursulines will draw some details from the writings of Sister Agnes Xavier Trail, a Scotswoman who was the daughter of a Church of Scotland minister. She converted to Catholicism and, after joining the Ursulines of Jesus, she helped to found the convent in Edinburgh.

The Ursulines of Jesus

The origins of the Ursulines of Jesus (not be confused with the old Order of Ursulines) can be traced back to a French priest and a Hospitaliere sister in La Rochelle. Father Louis-Marie Baudouin was ordained in 1789.³ He refused to be brought under the control of the new government and was imprisoned twice and exiled in Spain for five years. When he returned to France in 1797 he was forced into hiding and secretly celebrated the sacraments. He met Sister Charlotte-Gabrielle Ranfray, a Hospitaliere sister in La Rochelle, who was reportedly distraught at the closing of the convents. He persuaded her to abandon the monastery to care for the poor and educate the children. This was the beginning of the Daughters of the Incarnate Word, later known as the Ursulines of Jesus. They would be devoted to teaching. First, they taught the young ladies of the upper and middle classes. After that they taught the poor and any women who sought instruction. They also cared for the poor and the sick and, once they had arrived in Scotland, would minister to Catholic female prisoners in Perth. On July 2nd, 1802, Charlotte-Gabrielle arrived in Chavagnes-en-Pailleur in La Vendee in a cart with five companions. She was welcomed by Father Louis-Marie Baudouin, the parish priest, and the first sisters opened a small boarding school for girls. They also nursed the sick and assisted the priest in pastoral duties. In the next 32 years the community spread throughout France.

Arrival in Scotland

Fr. James Gillis was instrumental in the process of establishing the Ursulines in Scotland.⁴ He was a Canadian born priest with family roots in Banffshire who was attached to the Eastern District of Scotland.⁵ Gillis would later become bishop in 1838 and Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District in 1852. In 1828 he was sent to France to raise money to repair St. Mary's Chapel in Broughton Street in Edinburgh. The money was successfully raised and while in France he participated in a spiritual retreat in the Monastery of La Trappe. While on this retreat he felt inspired by God to restore religious orders in Scotland. Monseigneur Soyer, the Bishop of Lucon was also on the retreat and introduced Gillis to Louis Marie Baudouin who was one of the priests of his diocese and to the Ursulines of Jesus. These encounters provided further motivation for Gillis. Later, he returned to the continent to raise funds to establish a convent in Edinburgh.

Two Scottish women were to be of invaluable assistance to Gillis in the establishment of the Ursulines in Edinburgh. Ann Agnes Trail was the daughter of a Church of Scotland minister and she converted to Catholicism while on a trip to Rome.⁶ She met Gillis in Hammersmith when he was en route to the continent. She was already considering entering religious life which was complicated by the fact that she wanted to return to Scotland but up to that point there were no opportunities to become a religious in Scotland. The plan to establish a convent in Edinburgh was an answer to her prayers. She offered to be a member of the Ursuline community in Edinburgh which would be affiliated to the French congregation but be governed independently. Margaret Clapperton was raised in Fochabars and had known James Gillis all of her life. She too offered to be part of the convent in Edinburgh. The two ladies travelled to Chavagnes on the 31st of August 1833 to begin their novitiate as Ursulines of Jesus. On the 6th of October 1833, they accepted the veil. Miss Trail adopted the name Sister Agnes Xavier and Miss Clapperton adopted Sister Margaret Teresa. Once they had completed their training they left for Edinburgh in 1834. They were joined by seven French sisters and two lay sisters. Mr. Gillis had purchased a large house for them in the city and the sisters lodged temporarily while the adaptations were completed to their new home. They moved to St Margaret's convent on December 26th, 1834. The boarding school for young ladies of the middle classes was opened and the first pupils arrived. The convent also attracted several postulants (both choir sisters and lay sisters) in 1835. The convent chapel was formally opened on the 16th June 1835 and the postulants were received into the order during the opening ceremony. On St. Andrew's feast day in 1840 Sister Agnes Xavier Trail and Sister Margaret Teresa Clapperton and two French sisters made their vows in the convent chapel. This was highly significant as these were the first solemn professions in Scotland for centuries. James Gillis maintained a close link with the convent and when Quarant' Ore first commenced in Edinburgh, it took place in 1842 in the convent chapel.

A small group of sisters rented a house in Reid's Court in Edinburgh, took over some local Catholic poor schools and provided free medicine to the poor. The three sisters who worked there were known as 'Sisters of Charity'. The sisters later moved to a larger property, 'Milton House'. The sisters ministered to the poor from this house and were able to receive some orphans. They would later open a school for day-boarders for the middle class. This school was relocated to George square and later to Lochrin House but was closed in 1858 and a day school called St Ann's Seminary was opened in Nicolson Square shortly afterwards. It too was later relocated, and a new day school was built on convent land at St. Margaret's in Strathearn Road in 1884 -1885 and opened on the 4th of May 1885.

The Threat of Convent Inspections

There was serious anxiety in the convent in the early 1850s as attempts were made to introduce legislation that permitted inspection of convents.⁷ These attempts were rooted in suspicions about convent life and a general mistrust of Roman Catholicism

exacerbated by the recent Restoration of the Hierarchy in England in 1850 (the Scottish hierarchy was restored in 1878). In 1851 a Bill introduced in Parliament by Henry Charles Lacy MP proposed that female religious houses be registered with the local Clerk of the Peace and that a convent be visited twice per annum by at least six justices of the peace. Any woman who wished to leave a convent would be removed. Any failure to register a convent or any infringements that involved withholding or providing misleading information on the membership of the convent or obstructing the inspection would be dealt with very harshly. The Bishop of Birmingham, William Bernard Ullathorne defended convent life. He pointed out that the sisters had freely chosen this life and he vigorously opposed the Bill.⁸ After some robust exchanges in Parliament, Lacey's bill was not approved though he did have the vocal support of Charles Newdegate MP and Henry Drummond MP. Drummond argued that convents had to be inspected and that this was the duty of Parliament not local magistrates. His arguments included statements that convents were prisons or brothels which attracted fierce protest from other MPs. The campaign for inspections would continue for some time and a renewed attempt by Thomas Chambers MP was defeated in 1853. James Gillis, who brought the Ursulines and later the Sisters of Mercy to Edinburgh, travelled to London to support the opposition to the Bill introduced by Chambers. The campaign abated after 1871 as anti-Catholicism diminished.⁹

The Irish Connection

In 1855 some of the sisters were sent to Dublin by Bishop Gillis to 'become acquainted with the methods of education followed in the best schools'. This would include schools run by the Loretto Convent, Irish Sisters of Charity, Sacred Heart Convent, Presentation Convent and the Dominican Convent. Bishop Gillis invited the Sisters of Mercy from Ireland to found a house in Edinburgh and take charge of some poor schools in Edinburgh and visit the sick. They arrived in 1858. They were warmly welcomed by the Ursulines, not least because one of the foundresses of the Edinburgh house for the Sisters of Mercy was Miss Helen Grant (Mother Mary Juliana) who had been the first pupil at St. Margaret's.

The work in the prison and schools in Perth

In 1863 a new convent was opened, and this included new rooms for the school. On the 25th of September in 1864, Bishop Strain had succeeded Bishop Gillis after his death on the 24th of February 1864.¹⁰ Bishop Strain accompanied by Fr George Rigg approached the sisters in January 1865 that they might visit and instruct the Catholic female prisoners in Perth prison and teach in the Catholic schools. The 1839 Act to improve Prisons and Prison Discipline in Scotland proposed a General Prison for Scotland in Perth for prisoners who were serving sentences that exceeded nine months, were in penal servitude or were criminal lunatics.¹¹ The Act also stated that all prisoners 'shall be furnished with the Means of Moral and Religious Instruction' and created, for the first time, a formal role for the (established) Church in prison.¹² The new prison

chaplain, the Reverend William Brown, was appointed to the General Prison in Perth when it opened in 1842.¹³ Reverend Brown was a Church of Scotland Minister and a Catholic and an Episcopal priest were appointed in the lesser status of Visiting clergymen.¹⁴ This was reflected in the salaries that were awarded. In 1868 the Chaplain received an annual sum of between £200 and £300 and an annual £10 increment. The Visiting Catholic clergymen received £70 and the Visiting Episcopal clergymen £50 per annum and neither received an increment.¹⁵ In late 1864 the Secretary of State had granted permission for religious to visit Perth prison and this had prompted the approach by Bishop Strain in 1865. The sisters made the preparations and on the 16th May 1865 Mother Mary Angela and five others from St. Margaret's opened St. Joseph's convent in Perth. This was a new form of ministry for the sisters and they began visiting the prison on the 1st of June to support the work of Rev. Dr. Macpherson who had succeeded Fr. Rigg as the Catholic visiting chaplain. They instructed the women in the prison every day and on Sundays conducted devotions. They also worked in the local Catholic schools and ministered to the poor and the sick. One of their concerns was that the discharged prisoners be located in a safe home and be suitably employed rather than return to their previous lives which often led to a return to prison. Fr. Rigg was to return to Perth when he took up residence as Bishop of Dunkeld and he was to prove a firm friend and supporter of the sisters.

Expansion of the work in Edinburgh

Sister Agnes Xavier Trail died on the 3rd of December 1872. The following year the sisters in Edinburgh commenced visiting the Craiglockhart Poorhouse to instruct the Catholics who resided there. They were allowed to use one of the rooms as a chapel for devotions and instruction and occasionally mass was celebrated. The sisters were asked to take charge of two schools in Edinburgh, one in York Lane and one in Maryfield. The Maryfield school would later become the responsibility of the Marist brothers and the Franciscans nuns from Glasgow would take charge of the York Lane school in 1880. In 1875 the Bishop asked the sisters to provide Christian instruction to the Catholics residing in Davidson's Mains, then a village outside of Edinburgh, now part of the city. This continued till a priest was appointed in 1882 (though resumed in 1885 when the priest was relocated).

Concluding Points

In 1883 Mother Margaret Teresa who had taken her vows with Sister Agnes Xavier Trail in 1833 celebrated her golden jubilee. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the celebration is the attendance of 'honoured guests' from other religious orders: The Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of the Good Shephard, Oblates of Mary, Franciscans and Little Sisters of the Poor. A year later, at the time of the golden jubilee of St. Margaret's convent in 1884, there were nearly twenty religious orders and congregations in Scotland. This can be contrasted with 1834 when the sisters arrived in Edinburgh and were the only religious in Scotland. Their story in those first fifty years is remarkable

in that they were among the pioneers of religious life in Post-Reformation Scotland. Equally remarkable is the breadth of their activities that extended beyond school education and their willingness to accept new challenges.

Stephen McKinney is Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Glasgow and visiting Professor of Catholic Education at Newman University.

¹ Dilworth, M. (1978) Religious Orders in Scotland, 1878-1978. *The Innes Review* 29 (1) 92-109.

² Fitzpatrick, T.A. (1995) *No Mean Service*. Glasgow: John S. Burns and Sons.

³ Ursulines of Jesus (2018) *Our Story*. <http://www.ursulinesjesus.org/our-story.htm>

⁴ Kehoe, S. K. (2010) *Creating a Scottish Church*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 55, 76-80.

⁵ Trail, A. (1886) *A history of St. Margaret's Convent, The First Religious House Founded in Scotland since the So-called Reformation and the Autobiography of the first religious, Sister Agnes Xavier Trail*. Edinburgh: John Chisholm.

⁶ Her father and family were initially displeased about the conversion but did become reconciled and later were frequent visitors to the convent (p.246-7). The biographical sketch at the beginning of the autobiography states, somewhat anachronistically to contemporary sensibilities, that Sr. Agnes provides ‘insight into the effect of Calvinistic teachings on a mind that is bought up under the influence of these gloomy doctrines’. Further, the ‘perfect peace and joy’ experienced after her conversion can be contrasted with ‘these early mental terrors’ (p.247).

⁷ Kollar, R. (2011) Bishop William Ullathorne and His Defense of Convents. In *A Foreign and Wicked Institution? The Campaign against Convents in Victorian England*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.

⁸ Champ, J. (2006) *William Bernard Ullathorne, 1806-1889*. Gracewing Publishing.

⁹ Paz, D. G. (1992) *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*. Stanford University Press.

¹⁰ Agnes Trail (1886) is incorrect in reporting the consecration of bishop Strain on the 25 September 1865 (p.175).

¹¹ Historic Environment Scotland (2015) *Scotland's Prisons. Research Report 2015*.

¹² *An Act to improve Prisons and Prison Discipline in Scotland*, XXII; XXVIII.

¹³ Smith, H. (1997) *Chaplaincy, power and prophecy in the Scottish prison system: the changing role of the prison chaplain*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh. <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/30771>

¹⁴ Smith (1997) notes that this would continue till 1988 and this contrasts with England where the Roman Catholic chaplain enjoyed equal status with the Church of England chaplain by 1878 (p.10).

¹⁵ Cameron, J. (1983) *Prisons and Punishment in Scotland. From the middle Ages to the Present*. Edinburgh: Canongate.