

A Short History  
of  
The Poor Clares,  
Galway

By  
Celsus O' Brien O.F.M.

First Published 1992

## Foreword to the 2008 website edition

It is with great joy that we can now make our history book, written by Fr. Celsus O' Brien OFM, available on this website. Fr. Celsus died in 2004 and we wish to remember him with heartfelt gratitude to God, and with the deepest affection. We cherish the memory of his visits to Nuns' Island, as well as his fraternal concern for our Poor Clare way of life. He was truly a man of God and an ardent follower of St. Francis and St. Clare. He spent much time in his latter years translating literature and articles of Franciscan and Clarian interest from Italian and Spanish into English for the benefit of his Poor Clare sisters. Likewise we wish to remember the work and collaboration of J.P Cusack of Connacht Tribune printing with deep appreciation. He died in 2005. May they rest in peace

The Poor Clare Sisters  
June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Commemoration of another June 18<sup>th</sup> 1825  
"Market Street Day" when the Community  
returned definitively to Nuns' Island  
from Market Street

## Foreword

For the Canonisation of St. Agnes of Prague (1989) Fr. Celsus O'Brien, O.F.M. wrote a brief history of this new saint whom the Czechs "would learn to call Clarissine". Closing this Life he said, "there would be other centuries, other lands, other communities of Poor Ladies". We urged him to take up his pen again and recount for us the story of another century – the 20th, another land – ours. This story, the story of Nuns' Island, unfolds in the following pages.

It is good that these pioneering Sisters who were the first to bring the life of the "Poor Ladies" to Ireland should be remembered. In pursuing this vocation they had chosen to bring the Gospel way of life, as envisioned by St. Clare in Umbrian Italy, to the women of Ireland. It is salutary to recall that these were Penal times and being faithful meant banishment and exile, not once, but many times. Today, we give thanks for their fidelity.

As you read these pages, we ask that you give praise to God for St. Clare, the first "Poor Lady", and for the countless poor ones who strive to follow God's call, especially in today's 'Penal lands'.

What more fitting blessing can we invoke for all those who make it possible for us, today, to continue what started in Galway, 350 years ago this year, than St. Clare's own Blessing:

*"May the Lord be with you always  
and may you be with Him always and in every place".*

Poor Clare Sisters,  
Nuns' Island, Galway.  
January 30, 1992  
Anniversary of date of issue of  
'Patent': given at "Bethlehem"  
to found Galway Monastery, 1642.

## Introductory Note

The history of the Poor Clares in Galway has already been told many decades ago by Mrs. Helen Concannon in her book, *The Poor Clares in Ireland* (1929). This commemorative booklet covers somewhat the same ground, though not in the same fashion.

Apart from the material which has been preserved by the sisters in Nuns' Island, I have been given free access to the archives of the Franciscan house, Dún Mhuire, Killiney. This has helped to fill out the story of the sisters in some greater detail.

All the time one is struck by a sense of continuity. This is seen not merely in the life of the Poor Clare community itself, but also in the way in which documents have been carefully kept for close on three and a half centuries. Large pages and fragmentary pieces of paper were lovingly cherished, even as the nuns moved from place to place in unhappier and less secure times. Unknown to themselves they were writing their own story.

What follows is a tribute to the early followers of St. Clare in Galway, many of them natives of the city and county, and to those who have been called to continue in their footsteps.

C. O'B.

## Contents

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
I The Flanders Connection .....	6
II An Opening in Ireland .....	8
III Bethlehem .....	10
IV Foundation in Galway.....	17
V Into Exile.....	27
VI In Hiding .....	30
VII The Return Home .....	37
VIII 350 Years After .....	41

## CHAPTER I

# The Flanders connection

The introduction of the Order of St. Clare into Ireland comes at a relatively late date in the history of the Poor Clares. We have no clear evidence that the Order established any house in Ireland in pre-Reformation times. Even though the Friars Minor had been in the country since at least 1230, or perhaps a little earlier, their Sisters of the Second Franciscan family would not arrive until close on four centuries later.

Writing in 1618 the Irish Provincial, Fr. Donagh Mooney, stated that he had neither seen nor heard of women of the Second Order or Third Order Regular in the country, apart from an unsubstantiated tradition that the Poor Clares once had a foundation in Carrick-on-Suir. The situation is not unlike that of the Dominican Second Order which made a foundation in Galway only in 1644, although the Order of Preachers had been in the country since 1224.

One can only surmise that this was due to the country's isolation at the edge of Europe. Elsewhere the Second Order had spread widely even during the lifetime of St. Clare. Spain, Germany, France and Czechoslovakia had welcomed Clare's daughters before her death in 1253. And before the century was out they were in Belgium, Portugal, Poland, Hungary, England and elsewhere.

The chronicle of the Poor Clare monastery of Gravelines in the north-east of France has this precious entry: "Anno Domini 1620. The 25th of December made her holy profession Sister Martha Cheevers. Now called Martha Mariana of the Irish Nation, being aged 21 years". A native of Wexford, her brother, Fr. Walter Cheevers, was a member of the Irish Province. This very likely influenced her in the choice of her vocation.

It may put things into perspective if we reflect that when Martha Cheevers was making her profession, after spending a year as a novice in Gravelines, the famous abbess of Manila, Jeronima de la Fuente, was half-way on her journey from her native Toledo to the Philippines along with seven companions.

The monastery of Gravelines had been founded in 1609 by Mary Ward to cater for English girls wishing to become Poor Clares. She would later establish the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or Sisters of Loreto. There is ample evidence

that Irish as well as English girls sometimes went abroad, particularly to France, for the purpose of education. An anti-Catholic bias on the part of the State, both in England and Ireland, sometimes made such emigration necessary. Perhaps not always, for we know that some future Poor Clares from Galway were well educated without having to leave their native city. However, those who went abroad and felt a call to the religious life found a welcome in the English Poor Clare community.

If the attraction of St. Clare was slow in showing itself, the growth of Irish postulants at Gravelines was steady and fruitful. By 1625 there were four other Irish nuns in the community. Two sisters from Westmeath, Eleanor Mary Dillon and Cecily Dillon, were both professed on 8th September, 1622. They were soon joined by Alice Nugent, also from Westmeath, and by Mary Dowdall from Dublin, both of them being professed in 1625.

It is clear from the Gravelines chronicle that the Irish postulants had an early intention of making a foundation of the Order in Ireland. With this in mind the five nuns, under the leadership of Eleanor Mary Dillon, now twenty-seven years of age, made their way to Dunkirk on 20th May, 1626. Their stay here was short and they moved northwards to Nieuwport in Flanders early in 1627. That same year their number was increased by two postulants from Dublin, Mary Augustine Power and Brigid Anthony Eustace. The time was getting ripe for a return to their own country.



## CHAPTER II

# An opening to Ireland

Two more years were to pass in Nieuwport before the little group of seven set sail for Dublin. They must have been accompanied by one or two friars. It was the normal custom within the Order. Fairly small trading ships plying between France and Ireland would be available and would attract little public attention.

Their arrival did not pass unnoticed in Franciscan circles. The members of the Provincial Chapter, held at Limerick in August, 1629, welcomed them in the following statement: "Since, with an obedience from the Most Rev. Fr. Bro. Joseph Bergaigne, commissary general, the nuns of St. Clare have come from Flanders to this Province of Ireland around the feast of St. Anthony of Padua of the present year, by resolution of this Chapter they are declared to be received and incorporated into this Province, and Rev. Fr. Bro. Bonaventure Dillon is appointed as their confessor".

Was the time really opportune? Fr. Thomas Strange had this comment to make in a letter to Luke Wadding, dated 4th August, 1629: "Our nuns living in Nieuwport have reached Dublin, and they have in mind to build a house with enclosure there; only time, I think, will tell the outcome".

The Sisters must have arrived from Flanders with high hopes of religious toleration. Charles I of England had married a Catholic princess from France, and was personally tolerant of Catholics in England. The same leniency presumably extended to Ireland. The Dillon sisters could also count on the influence and support of their brother, Sir Lucas Dillon, who was a member of the Privy Council.

Parliament in Dublin, with its many Puritan members, was of a less tolerant mind. The Lord Deputy, Falkland, was reckoned to belong to the more tolerant wing of the Government. Yet it did not prevent him from attempting, though unsuccessfully, to have the young Viscount Dillon of the Sligo branch of the family, brought up as a Protestant. He separated from his wife, Elizabeth Tanfield, on discovering that she had secretly become a Catholic. Surprisingly, she managed to conceal the fact for twenty years. Two of her sons would later become priests, and four daughters became nuns in France.

Meanwhile the new community settled quietly in Dublin, this time with Cecily



Dillon as abbess. Within little more than a year they grew from their original seven to nineteen.

The situation, however, remained precarious. Whatever the tolerance of the Lord Deputy, who may have tried to steer a middle course, things took a different turn under those who succeeded him. When Falkland was recalled to England in Autumn 1629, the administration of affairs in Ireland was put into the hands of Lord Chancellor Adam Loftus and the Earl of Cork, Richard Boyle, as Lords Justices. Both of them were zealous anti-papists.

On St. Stephen's Day, 1629, they took a strong hand against the Franciscan chapel at Merchants' Quay where Mass was being celebrated. The archbishop of Dublin, the mayor and sheriffs were dispatched with a company of soldiers to arrest the friars and disband the congregation. As many as fifteen churches were closed down in the capital in this period.

The turn of the Poor Clares was not long in coming. On 22nd October, 1630, their routine of life was shattered. The house was raided by the civil authorities and a guard posted on the convent. Five of the Sisters, including the abbess, were brought for interrogation before the Lords Justices and the Privy Council at Dublin Castle. The sight of the Sisters in their bare feet, their composure and their moderate answers, gained them a short reprieve. Although at first they were sentenced to expulsion from the country, other views prevailed. Perhaps Sir Lucas Dillon was instrumental in bringing about a milder judgment. In the upshot the Sisters were given a month's grace in which to leave the city. They were forbidden to come together as a community anywhere in Ireland, and were ordered to appear before the Privy Council within three months if this were required by the authorities. One can imagine the consultation that must have taken place between the Sisters and their nearby relatives and friends as they planned their next move. Certainly, they must take to the road again and regroup somewhere far from the eyes of Dublin Castle.



*Saint Francis*

## CHAPTER III

# Bethlehem

We know from a subsequent account that all decided to leave Dublin, including six novices who had the option of returning to their own families. "None would tarry with their parents". The spirit of St. Clare had taken strong hold on her Irish daughters. Clare herself, some centuries previously, had set out on a journey from Assisi, equally full of uncertainties, in the dark of night one Palm Sunday in the year 1212. Insecurity about the future did not daunt her.

Her new spiritual daughters divided themselves up into three companies and took the western road from Dublin. Their destination was the estate of Sir Lucas Dillon in Co. Westmeath. Obviously the writ of the Privy Council did not run in parts far outside the Pale.

A residence was built for them in the townland of Ballinaccliffey, some five miles from Athlone. They called it "Bethlehem". The name was appropriate. It was the title of a monastery which St. Colette had founded in Ghent in 1442, and where she would die five years later. An appropriate title, for these Irish Poor Clares belonged to the reformed branch of the Order known as Colettines.



“Bethlehem”...the silent ruin which still remains



..after restoration work.



..the situation of the ruin with Lough Ree in the background

A Galway-born nun, Mary Bonaventure Browne, who was later to join the Bethlehem community, wrote of the early conditions: "It was situated in such a low and shadowed bogg as the physitions wondered how such tender creatures (very delicatly bred) could live therein; for in wett and rainy wedder the water would not onely fall over them through the rooffe of the house, but alsoe in severall places came upp under the ground; besides that, all their houses were soe low that their cells and all other roomes (except onely the quire) were uppon the ground".

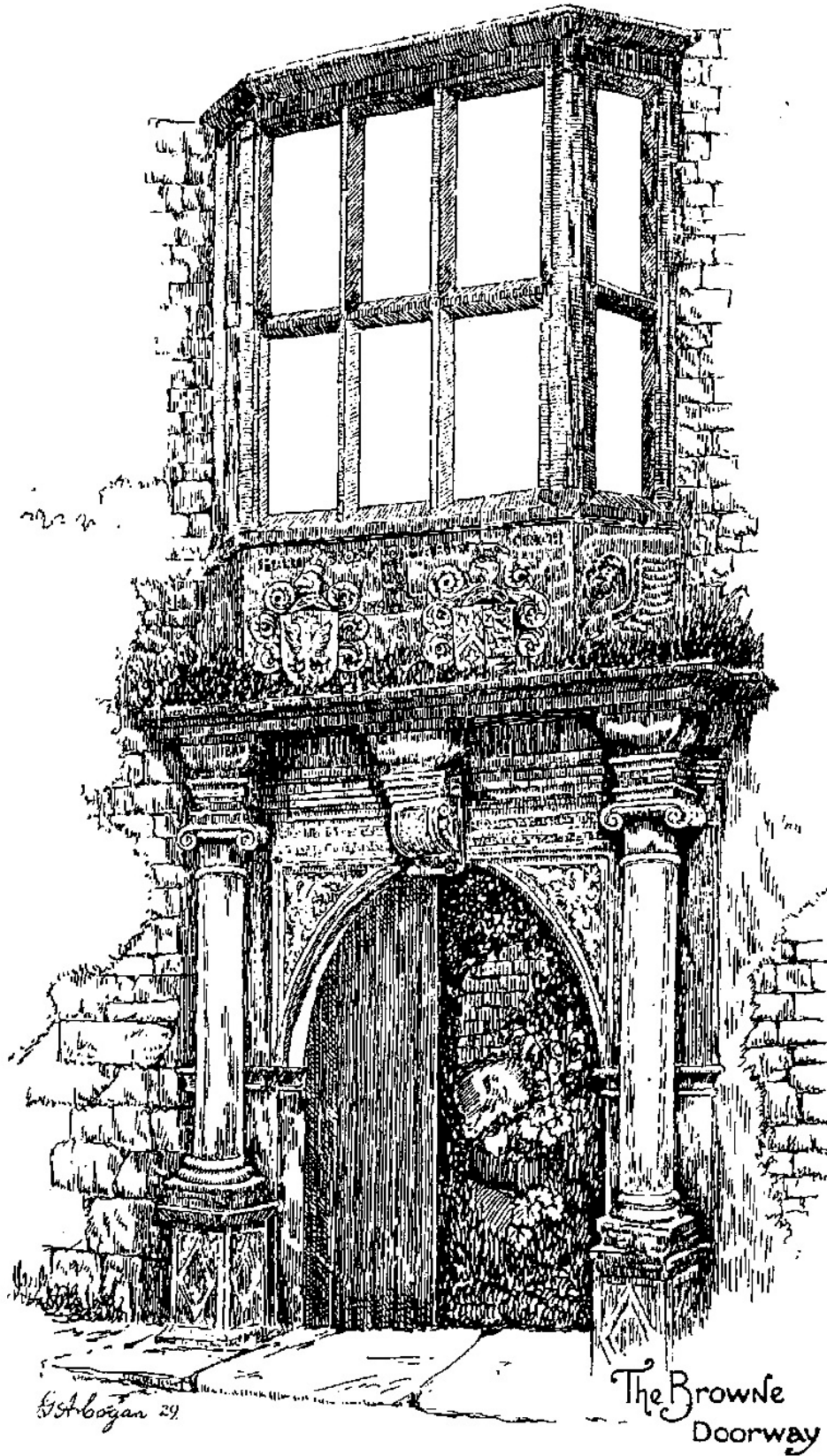
The community in Bethlehem grew with extraordinary rapidity, reaching as many as sixty religious. The silent ruin which still remains gives us no idea of the extent of the buildings which housed such numbers. Among the first postulants to arrive there was one from Galway: Sr. Catherine Francis Browne entered the community in 1630. We are fortunate to possess the original document in Latin, dated 29th January, 1631, in which Fr. Patrick Plunkett, guardian of Athlone, authorised her to proceed to the taking of vows. She is judged "fit and suitable to make profession among the Sisters of Saint Clare in Bethlehem".

*Ego ... scriptus ad hoc destinatus in Bethleem  
 Domino Thoma diez episcopo medonisi Examinavit  
 Sorore catherina a fr. francisco alias Browne de omnibus  
 conditionibus necessariis a concilio Sri, quare per se  
 et idone ad emittendum professionem inter sorores  
 sctae clare: Bethleem. Data Bethleem 29 Jan. 1631  
 Car. Catharine Francis Guardiani Athlonensis.*

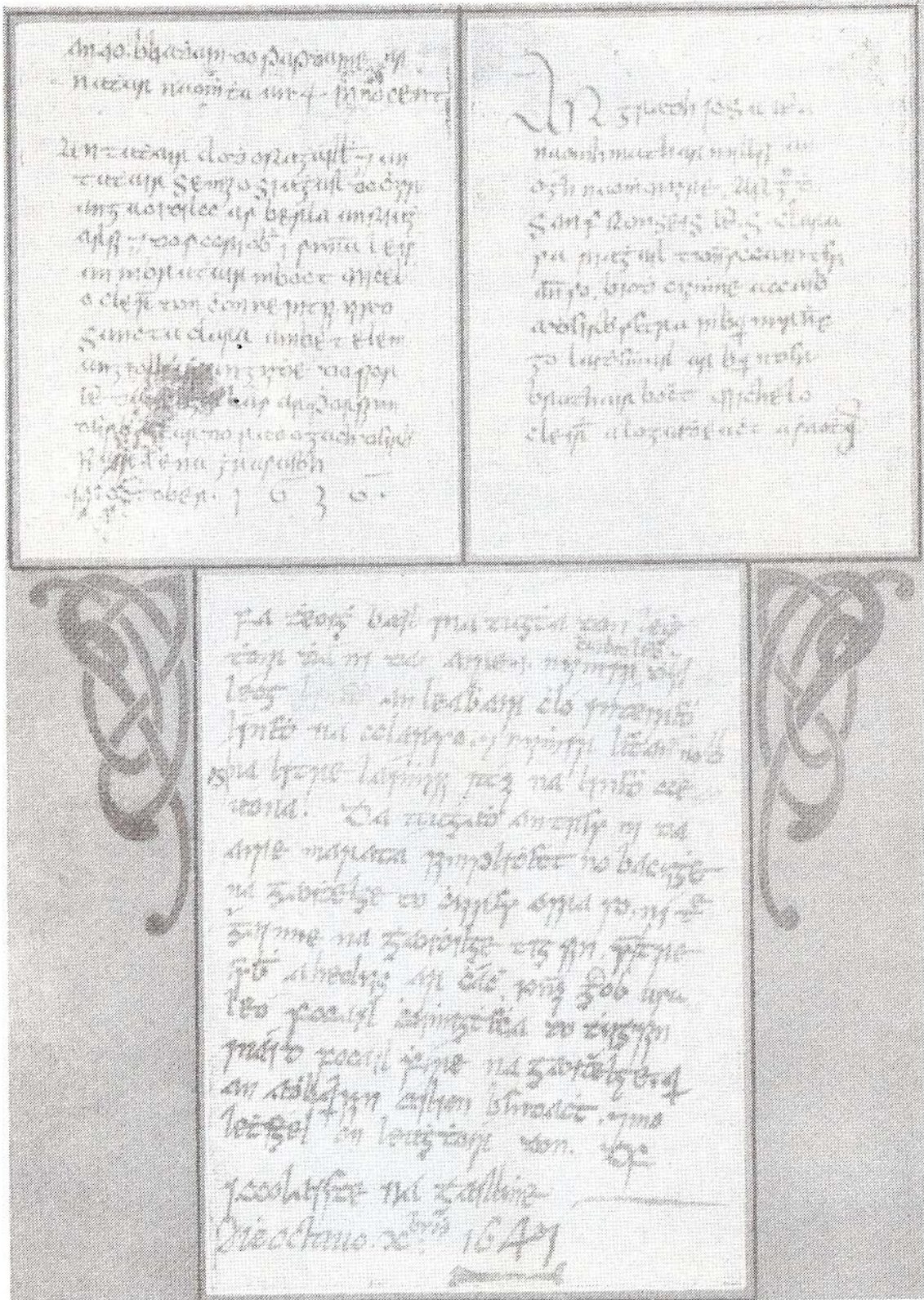
*Profession Document of 1631*

She was followed by three more girls from Galway City. Helen Martin received the habit on the Eve of the Annunciation, 1632, and took the name Sr. Mary Gabriel. The other two were sisters, Catherine Bernard Browne and Mary Bonaventure Browne, daughters of Andrew Browne and Catherine Bodkin. On both sides they came of prominent Galway families. Their grandfather, Oliver Browne, had been mayor of Galway in 1609. The Bodkins owned large tracts of land in East Galway.

We owe most of our knowledge of the early history of the Irish Poor Clares to Mary Bonaventure Browne. Her narrative, written while exiled in Spain, covers the years from 1629 to 1670. The original, written in Irish, has been lost, but its



*Browne Doorway in Eyre Square, Galway. This was originally in the house of Martin Browne, Abbeygate Street, uncle of Mother Mary Bonaventure and Mother Catherine Bernard Browne.*



Above: PAGES OF THE RULE OF ST. CLARE, transcribed at "Bethlehem" for the POOR CLARES, by Br. Michael O Cleirigh, O.F.M., Chief of the Four Masters.

Below: From the BLESSING AND TESTAMENT OF ST. CLARE, translated into Irish by Duald Mac Firsigh.

Both MSS. in R. I. Academy.

translation into English, written by a contemporary hand, has been preserved in the monastery in Galway. It is from her we learn that the nuns followed the primitive Rule of St. Clare and the Constitutions of St. Colette. She also mentions that Sr. Margaret Evangelist Moore was once abbess of Bethlehem, while Sr. Cecily Dillon was elected to that position as many as five times.

Others of the community were six nieces of the Dillon sisters. Four of them were daughters of a married sister, Elizabeth Fitzgerald, who lived in Co. Longford: Ellen, Cecily, Ann and Brigid. The other two, Elizabeth and Mary, were daughters of Sir Christopher Dillon from Co. Roscommon.

It was during these years that the Rule of St. Clare was translated from English into Irish for the benefit of the nuns. Fr. Aodh Ó Raghallaigh and Fr. Séamus Ó Siall drafted the first translation. This was corrected and written out by the great scholar, Bro. Micheál Ó Cléirigh, when he visited Bethlehem in October 1636. He adds this request to the Sisters: "For love of Jesus and his sweet holy Mother, the Virgin holy Mary, for love of Saint Francis and St. Clare and her Rule which is here begun, remember, Sisters, in your prayers each day your poor brother, Micheál Ó Cléirigh, in reward of his labour".

The chronicler, Mary Bonaventure Browne, describes the life of the Sisters in Bethlehem as she witnessed it: "The Abbess ordained that all ye community should by two and two and sometimes by foure and foure in every houre keepe their turnes in prayer before ye Most Blessed Sacrament, and when ye houre glasse should passe, one of such as were in prayer, to goe and give notice to those whose turne it was to come, to which they promptly came where it were by night or day".

The year 1641 saw many changes in the Bethlehem community. In June Sr. Margaret (Alice) Nugent, one of the pioneering group which entered the Order in Gravelines, made a foundation in Drogheda, along with sixteen companions. The venture was short-lived. When the town was taken over by Royalist troops early in the following year, the community fled to Waterford for refuge.

Bethlehem itself was not spared in the civil war. After being warned that English troops were approaching, the community fled from their convent and found temporary refuge on an island in Lough Ree in the summer of 1642. "The heretickes heareing how these Religious were brought to Gallway, it spurred them on the sooner to effect their wicked designe, lest the rest that remained in the Convent after them (which were about 30 in number) should be alsoe taken away before they should make their prey of them. Yett ye Sisters past some weecks there, for not haveing a convenient place wherein to settle themselves, untill at last they were warned that the heretickes were in their way towards the Convent, and soe they fled away in boates to ye other side of ye lake. The mercyleess heretickes seeing themselves frustrated of their malignant intent, entered into ye Convent and stayed therein for ye space of three dayes and three nights, devoureing all the provision of ye poore Sisters, and makeing their sport and laughter of the Alters, pictures, ornaments and sacred things which were therein, some of them would putt on ye habitts of ye Nunns they found there, and jesting at them, would say, come lett us

goe say Masse, and you to serve us. Lastly sett fire to ye Convent, and burned it with all that was therein, onely that God preserved miraculously the Tabernacle in which the Most Blessed Sacrement was, when they prayed before it, with the aforesaid fervour to be delivered from their enemies, and likewise an old Image of our Blessed Lady both made of wood".

The narrator does not mince her words when describing the retribution which fell on the invaders. "The said incredulous people received imediatly a condegne recompense for their detestable and sacreligious act; for even as they were marching backe, they were all surprised and killed (being in number 120) by a party of ye Irish Catholickes who to avenge such enormous a crime and publicke affront done to the Spouses of Christ, gathèred from the boardering villages, and fell upon them in the high way like fierce lyons, soe that none of said number escaped their hands, but onely one who fled to Athlone, and ye ensueing night being possest with an infernall fury stabbed himselfe with his one dagger, and soe went to accompany his fellow souldiers to hell".

It would be outside our purpose to follow the immediate fortunes of the Bethlehem community. Briefly, the community divided into two groups. One settled in Athlone under the abbess-ship of Sr. Cecily Dillon. The other group, led by Sr. Martha Mariana Cheevers, went to Wexford. It is told of her that "although Sister Martha dyed four yeares after, haveing before renounced ye office of president shee held, and procured ye Ellection of another Abbesse over ye Religious. And upwards of three yeares after her death, her grave opened of it selfe, being the summer before Cromwell tooke Wexford, which was ye first place he tooke in Ireland. Severall of ye fryers of ye monastery in which shee was buried, saw it...who affirmed then that her body was as white and fresh as when shee was buried, onely that her hands were as if they had beene anointed with oyle".

Neither the Athlone nor the Wexford community would survive the Cromwellian campaign in Ireland.



*St. Clare with St. Antony.*

*From the French monument at the Abbey, Galway (Figures mutilated by soldiers of Cromwell).*



## CHAPTER IV

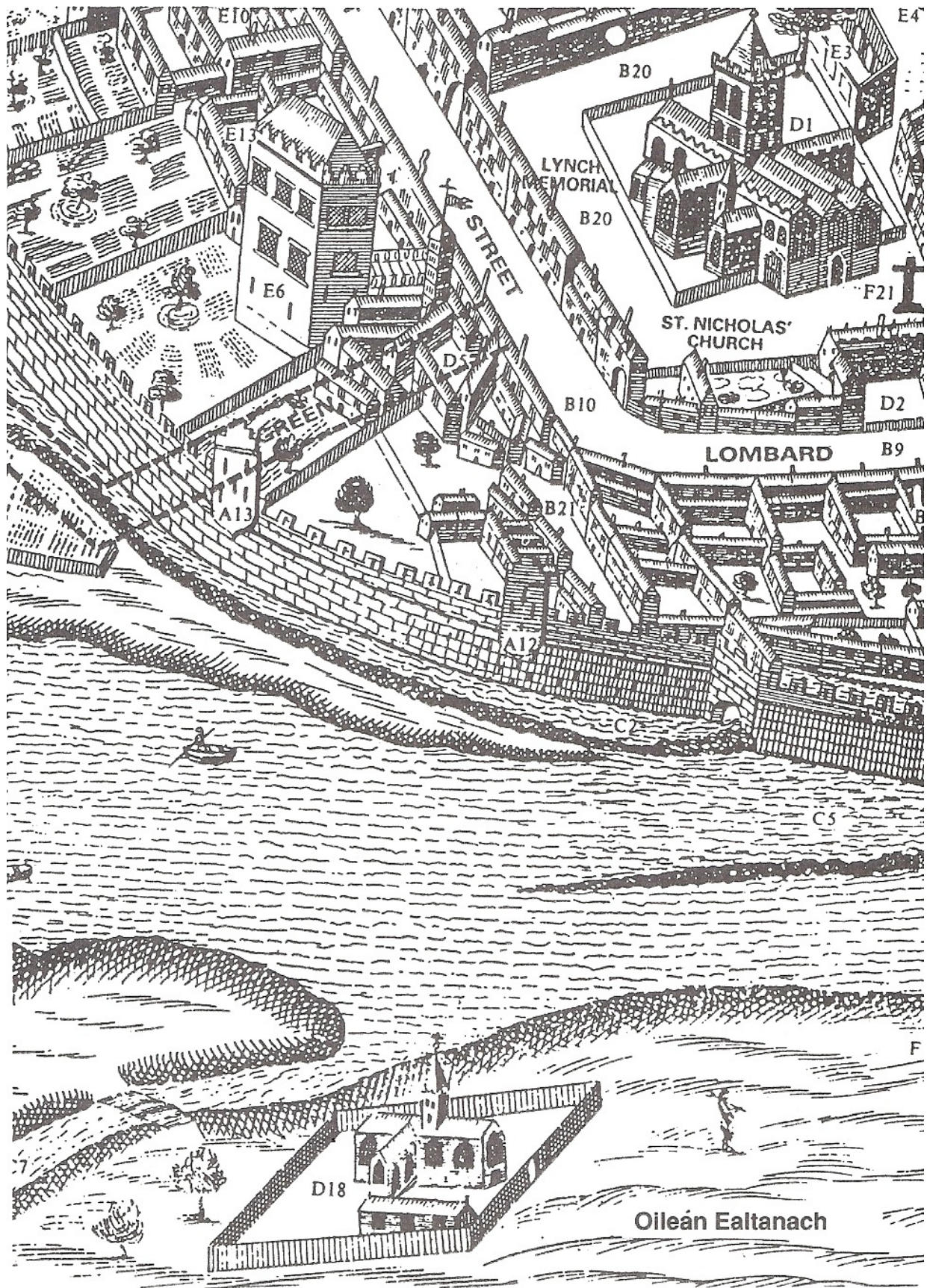
# Foundation in Galway

It may have been the move to Drogheda in 1641 that prompted some of the nuns to think of still another foundation. Galway had much to recommend in its favour. Many of the Sisters had come from the west. There was good reason to believe that their relatives and friends would willingly support a community of contemplative nuns. Galway, too, had not only a staunchly Catholic population, but was well fortified against any military attack from outside.

In a letter of 29th August, 1641, Fr. Valentine Browne confided to a fellow Franciscan, Hugh de Burgo: "There are of the town and countie of Galwey religious Clarisse, and doe intend to goe from Bethleem to Galway. For many reasons they are differred to go thither as yet".

The decision to establish a community in Galway was made early in the following year. In spite of the confusion and distress of later times, the monastery has managed to preserve the original Latin document of its foundation. It was issued at Bethlehem on 30th January, 1642 by the Provincial, Fr. Anthony Geoghegan. He names Sr. Mary Gabriel Martin as the elected abbess. The election would have been done by the Sisters intended for the new community. He lists those who are to accompany her. There are eleven professed Sisters, mentioned only by their religious names: Clare Anthony, Margaret Francis, Catherine Bernard, Mary Bonaventure, Catherine Francis, Catherine Thomas, Catherine Michael, Evelin Louis, Catherine Chrysostom, Lucy Clare, Mary Andrew. Two novices will also be among the group: Sabina Bryne and Mary Kelly. The reasons for the decision are given. "Many of our special friends and benefactors have often and earnestly proposed to us, and even humbly begged of us, because of the present disturbed times, that we should grant you permission to go to Galway, in order in inaugurate and erect a convent there. They are commanded "in virtue of holy obedience that you betake yourselves there on the first opportunity, proceeding on the way gravely and religiously, to the edification of all those whom you meet, so that God may be praised in his handmaids, and may mercifully grant you his generous blessing".

We have no idea how they travelled, perhaps on horse-drawn carts or on foot. Early in the next century it is reported that the roads in Ireland were in a wretched



*Section of the 1651 Map of the City of Galway  
with the Poor Clare Convent in the foreground (D18)*

All the people of Galway requested the Provinciall  
to send to the Town of Galway, such of them as  
as were skilful thereof, with as many of the best  
thought full, as well for the safety of their borders, as also  
to found a Convent therein, of the same first rule and  
constitution of S. Clare with whom they observed,  
The provinciall (who then was Father Anthony<sup>us</sup> Goghagan  
and styled by the office, and was afterwards Bishop of Limerick  
and Bagan of Meath) was glad of that don, because he  
was in great care and pain, about what he should do  
to deliver the said Religious, from coming to the hands of  
the enemies; And so came Father in person though he lived  
far off, accompanied with one of the Trinitarians  
And other great fathers of the order, by whose counsell he gave an  
passport for 14 of that holy flock to goe found a Convent in Galway  
as afterwards they did in great civility of life and regular observance  
not omitting in the least any of the great religion, and good education  
they got in Bohemia;

Extract from Mother Bonaventure Browne's Chronicle telling of the Foundation in Galway.

condition and often impassable. Bridges were scarce, so that detours along the way became necessary.

When the new community arrived in Galway they would have found another convent of the Order of St. Clare already in the city. It belonged to the Urbanists or "Rich Clares", as they are called in a map of the city drawn up in 1651. We know nothing of this elusive group beyond the record on two tombstones. One is for Elizabeth Lynch "foundress of the Order of St. Clare, who died 14 September, 1626". The other is that of "Caet Dily, Nun of the Order of St. Clara, who died 22 of February, anno 1638". The community may have died out completely before the coming of the Sisters from Bethlehem. Both of them were buried in the Franciscan graveyard, so they were well known to the friars.

The chronicler records that they lived "in great austerity of life and regular observance, not omitting in ye least any of ye great religion and good education they gott in Bethleem".

The example of the new community attracted as many as twenty-three postulants during the first few years. Among these were two sisters from Aughrim in Co. Galway: Elise and Elizabeth Skerrett, daughters of Edmond Skerrett. A letter from the Provincial, Anthony Geoghegan, dated 28th July, 1643, recommends their acceptance. Their combined dowries will be £300 sterling, to be paid by instalments of £30 per annum. A formal agreement was drawn up by Edmond Skerrett and his son Dominic on "payment of £300 for the livelihood and maintenance of the said Ellise and Elizabeth as by the said bond bearing date the 15 day of August 1644 may appear". The sisters are to have no further claim on the family property. For the sake of comparison we can note that, at the time, a bushel of wheat cost four shillings, a good servant maid earned ten shillings per annum, while a farm labourer could earn £6 or £7 in the year.

Mary Gabriel Martin was succeeded in office by Clare Anthony Kennedy. Then came Mary Bonaventure Browne, the narrator of events of those far-off days. Three noteworthy things occurred during her period as abbess.

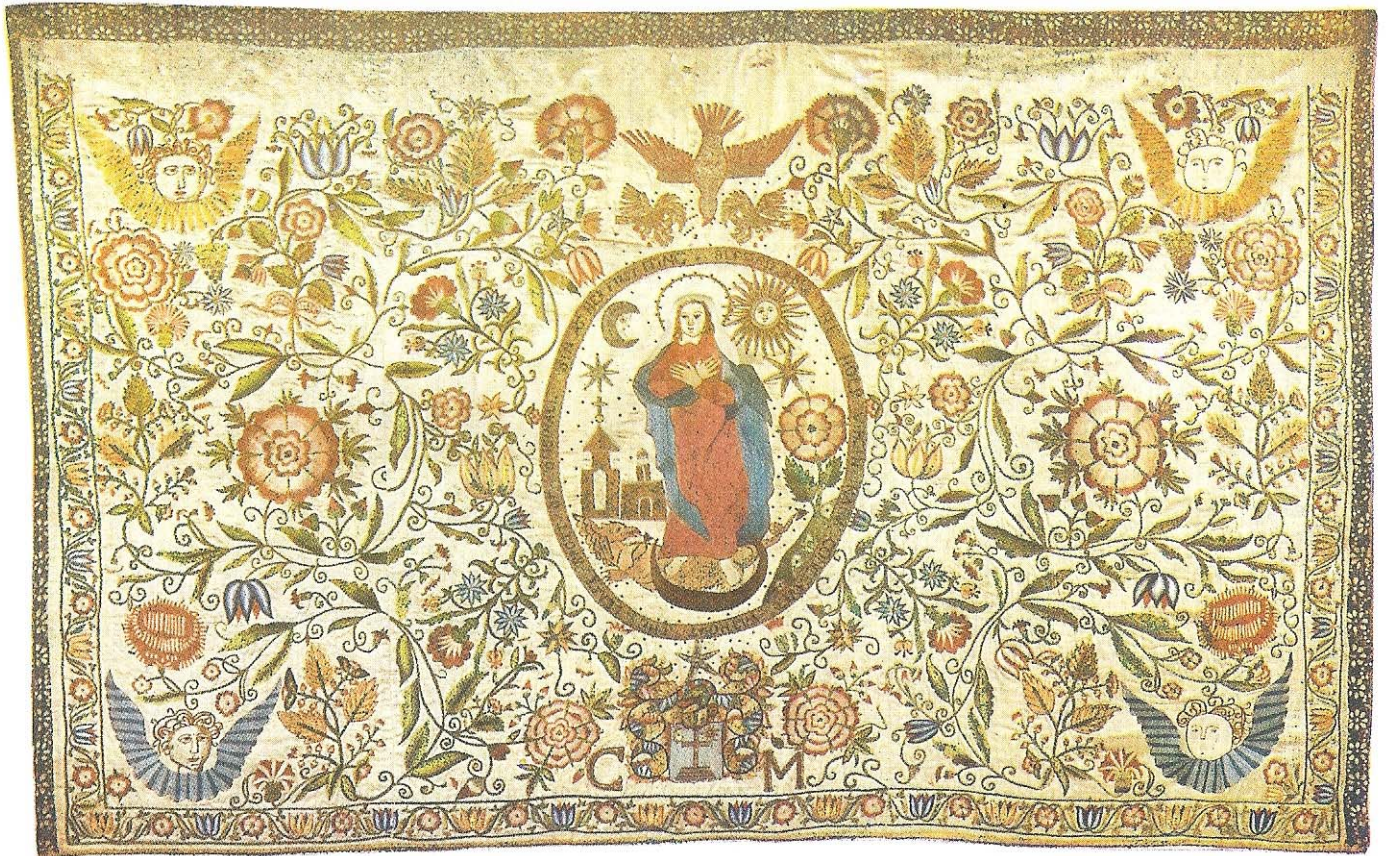
The first was a new foundation of the Order in Loughrea, some 25 miles south-east of Galway city. Loughrea must have been judged a safe location for the nuns, since it was the chief seat of the Earl of Clanricarde, a dedicated Catholic.

An agreement was drawn up for the Sisters by Fr. George Dillon, guardian of Galway, and Fr. Anthony de Burgo, confessor to the nuns. As the latter was appointed confessor at the Provincial Chapter held at Rosserilly on 5th September, 1647, we can be sure that it was this Chapter which authorised the Loughrea foundation. The agreement, signed by nine of the Poor Clares, is concerned with keeping intact the dowries of those professed in Bethlehem and those professed in Galway. Galway was to provide some vestments and furnishings for Loughrea, and the debt incurred in building a new residence would be shared by both communities.

Then, on 8th December, 1647, Dualtach Mac Firbisigh, a noted scholar, put the final touch to his translation into Irish of the Testament and Blessing of St. Clare and the Constitutions of St. Colette. Mac Firbisigh expresses a certain dissatisfaction

S<sup>tr</sup> Mary Bonaventuro  
worthy Abb<sup>t</sup> of Galway  
S<sup>tr</sup> Cate Francis  
S<sup>tr</sup> Mary Gabriel  
S<sup>tr</sup> Catherine Bernard  
S<sup>tr</sup> Catherine Michell  
S<sup>tr</sup> Helen Lodovicke  
S<sup>tr</sup> Mary E. F. F. F.  
S<sup>tr</sup> Mary Anthony  
S<sup>tr</sup> Mary Andrew

Signatures of the Sisters on the agreement at the founding of the Convent in Loughrea.



Antependium made by the Poor Clares in 1712 while in hiding in Market Street.



Chasuble bearing the Martin Arms made by the Poor Clares in 1712 while in hiding in Market Street.

r. Antonius Geogheganus ordi<sup>is</sup> Monach<sup>us</sup> S. Michaelis abbat<sup>is</sup> Cant<sup>oniae</sup> & Hyberniae  
 Prae<sup>sentis</sup> d<sup>omi</sup>n<sup>o</sup> vobis in xpo patri Mariae Gabrielis atq<sup>ue</sup> illar<sup>um</sup> Monach<sup>um</sup> profess<sup>us</sup> ordi<sup>is</sup>  
 in<sup>o</sup> J<sup>oseph</sup> Claret, nec non abbatissae cl<sup>arissimae</sup> g<sup>racie</sup> pro Con<sup>ventu</sup> Clarissimae g<sup>racie</sup> erigend<sup>ae</sup> &  
 ceteris sororibus v<sup>est</sup>ris Mariae Ant<sup>oniae</sup> Margaretae g<sup>racie</sup> Catharinae Bernardi, Mariae  
 Bonae Catharinae Franc<sup>iscae</sup> Catharinae Thomae Catharinae Michaelis, Eustachiae Ludovici Catha<sup>rinae</sup>  
 in<sup>o</sup> Chrysostomi Luciae Clarae Mariae Andreae Novitij. S. Sabinae Brigae, &  
 Mariae Kelly. ea<sup>rum</sup> co<sup>com</sup>itantibus saluti in D<sup>omi</sup>no sempiterna<sup>m</sup> &c.

Qu<sup>ia</sup> ex p<sup>ar</sup>t<sup>e</sup> multor<sup>um</sup> speculat<sup>um</sup> & amicor<sup>um</sup> & benedict<sup>um</sup> regis & fidele<sup>rum</sup> vobis proposit<sup>um</sup> fuit ac  
 v<sup>est</sup>ra humiliter supplicat<sup>um</sup> quatenus vobis habit<sup>um</sup> curiam hui<sup>us</sup> temporis concederem<sup>us</sup>  
 vobis licentia<sup>m</sup> eund<sup>em</sup> habit<sup>um</sup> illis ad dei in primis gloria<sup>m</sup> v<sup>est</sup>ra<sup>m</sup> salute<sup>m</sup> & consolatio<sup>nem</sup>  
 ordi<sup>is</sup> in<sup>o</sup> J<sup>oseph</sup> Claret. propagand<sup>um</sup> ac proximor<sup>um</sup> edificand<sup>um</sup>, convent<sup>um</sup> in<sup>o</sup> erigend<sup>um</sup>  
 & erigend<sup>um</sup>. Re mature ex omni<sup>um</sup> J<sup>oseph</sup> considerata, cum p<sup>ar</sup>t<sup>e</sup> v<sup>est</sup>ris amant<sup>er</sup> Torose  
 p<sup>ar</sup>t<sup>e</sup> dict<sup>am</sup> licentia<sup>m</sup> vobis concedimus & libenter imp<sup>er</sup>iamur cu<sup>m</sup> v<sup>est</sup>ra benedictio<sup>nem</sup>  
 Mandantes vobis in virtute J<sup>oseph</sup> & prima d<sup>omi</sup>ni libertate, cu<sup>m</sup> vos conferatis  
 g<sup>racie</sup> & Deligite in via m<sup>er</sup>it<sup>um</sup>, cu<sup>m</sup> omni<sup>um</sup> quibus obia<sup>m</sup> fueritis & def<sup>ici</sup>  
 catione, ut deus laudetur in ancillis suis, & sua largita benedictio<sup>nem</sup> vobis clem<sup>en</sup>  
 tissime imp<sup>er</sup>etur, ut quod fideliter intenditis officio<sup>rum</sup> obtineatis, ipsius  
 gram qui vos incipit, cui vos servite commendamus, & nos & nos o<sup>mn</sup>es v<sup>est</sup>ris sanctis p<sup>ar</sup>t<sup>e</sup>  
 deu<sup>m</sup> pro vobis orate. D<sup>omi</sup>ni Bethlem Die trigesimo Januarij 1642. Solo vobis.

Fr: Antonius Geogheganus  
 Abbat<sup>is</sup> Prae<sup>sentis</sup>



Original Latin document of Galway Monastery's foundation.



with his work. The style is too cramped and lacks richness. In excuse, he says that the nuns found it "easier to understand foreign words than genuine Irish ones". Some technical expressions, especially in the Constitutions of St. Colette, hindered an easy flow of language.

The third decision reached during her abbess-ship was a transfer from their first residence in Galway. Writing to Sir Walter Blake, mayor of the city, in 1648, she said: "Your poore petitioners doe suffer much by the exorbitant rent they pay, and, notwithstanding their due payment, are to be thrust out of their dwelling next May, their lease being then ended". This practical woman already knew what she wanted: "The petitioners humbly pray that you may be pleased to graunt them sufficient roome for building a monasterie and roomes convenient thereunto, a garden and orchard, in the next illand adjoining to the bridge of Illanalltenagh". The Corporation by majority vote granted the request on 10th July, 1649.

The archives of the monastery have the following account, written at a much later date: "In this yeare, after the said Corporation of Gallway soe granted them the aforesaid Island Althanagh, the said nunns built thereon a good large and spacious house with other conveniencies with the cost and charge of two hundred and odd pounds sterling of the Sisters portions in timber and other materialls, all which or the most parte thereof, was lost by the usurpation in Cromwells tyme, when the Towne of Gallway was surrendered to him. Then John Morgan tooke possession of ye aforesaid Island and houses and kept ye same for some yeares".

Some time later, after the community had settled into their new home, a branch of the river adjoining the property was given to the nuns in perpetuity by one James Reagh Darcy. A document of 1690 refers to it as "the Royall streame on the River of Galway betweene both the Islands Altenagh...legally conveyed...to the Religious nuns of the Order of St. Clare in Gallway and to their successors for ever". This was lost to the community in the Cromwellian wars.

It might be appropriate to insert here a description of Sr. Mary Bonaventure which is preserved in the monastery archives: "The third Abbesse of said Convent Mary Bonaventure alias Browne was a very good, holy and perfect religious Sister and was endowed with many rare vertues, as obedience, poverty, chastity, humility and charetie, shee was prudent and wise, well spoken in English, Irish and Spanish. Shee was the mirrour and lookeing glasse of religious observance, that belonged to her rule and Statuts all her lifetime, shee left a brave cronicle written under her one hand, which shee sent to this convent of Sainct Clare of Gallway, and a Remonastrance, a chalise, a holy curious Relick, many pictures, bookes, ornaments, and other fine things fitting for the Allter and devine service, all the aforesaid things now lost and burnt in the late warrs Anno 1691".

The next abbess, elected in 1650, was Sr. Catherine Bernard Browne. She would preside over the community in its final days before Galway fell to the forces of Cromwell.

The new abbess experienced problems from the start. The plague was sweeping through the city and county of Galway leaving thousands of victims in its wake.

Added to this there was the steady progress of the Royalist armies throughout the country. In answer to a request by the abbess, the Provincial, Fr. Thomas MacKiernan, wrote to her from Rosserilly on 27th June, 1650. To ease the consciences of the Sisters he gave permission to the abbess to place the nuns in a safer location, either inside or outside the city, should the plague or enemy armies threaten them; this on the advice of the confessor in the event that the Provincial himself could not be easily contacted.

The same permission was confirmed on 6th September, 1650 by the new Provincial, Fr. Francis O'Sullivan. In less than three years he himself would be martyred in his native Kerry.

*Pro fatum Licentiam etc*  
*Senore ordinis confirmo*  
 Aug 6. 1650  
 Fr. Francisus Sullivan  
 Elm's Treaty

*Signatures of the two Provincials*

Meanwhile Waterford fell to the Puritan army under General Ireton on 10th August, 1650. Athlone was taken on 18th June, 1651. The net was closing in.

It is very likely that the Sisters in Athlone fled to Loughrea, and then to Galway. Some may have been still living here and there with relatives. After the disbandment of Bethlehem, Sr. Cecily Dillon, in a letter of 27th December, 1642, speaks of her Sisters being dispersed to Wexford, and to the counties of Sligo, Westmeath, Galway, Longford and Offaly.

Galway continued intact for a short while more. There is even a record of Sr. Elizabeth Levelock being professed there in 1652. However, on 12th April, 1652 the city was obliged to surrender to the superior forces of Sir Charles Coote. And on 6th January, 1653 an edict was issued commanding all nuns to marry or to leave the country.

## CHAPTER V

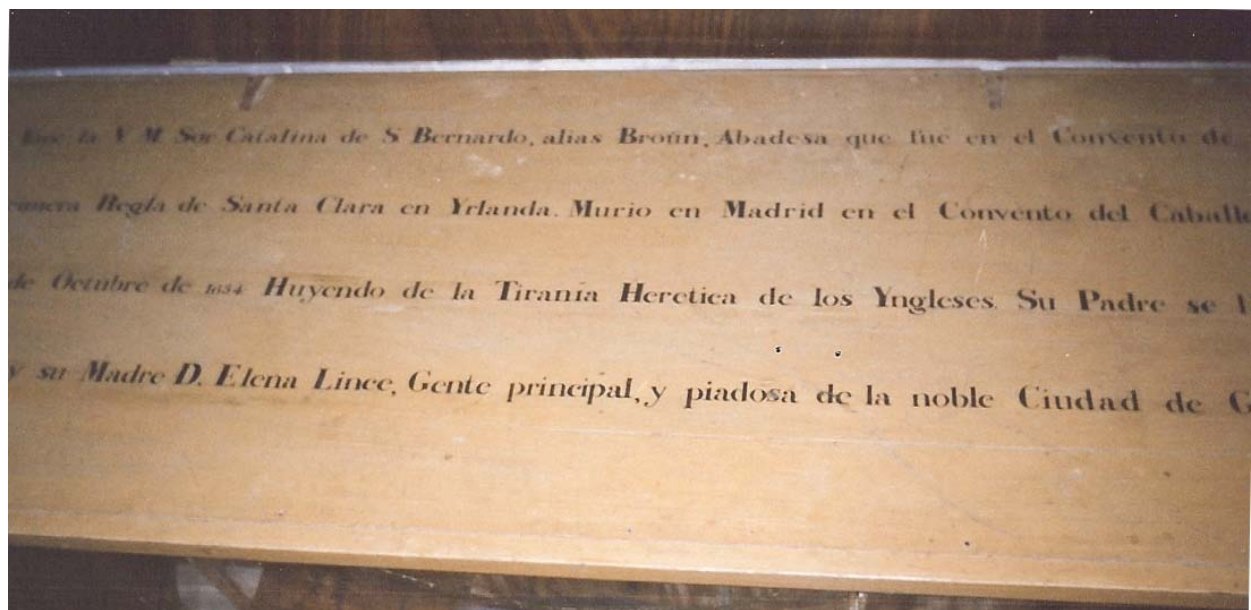
# Into exile

According to one account some 616,000 people perished in 1652 by the sword, plague and famine. It was a time when one might travel twenty or thirty miles and not see a living creature.

Mary Bonaventure Browne captured the mood of the Poor Clares when she wrote long afterwards: "The poore Nuns seeing themselves wandering abroad deprived of ye earthly paradise of their Religion and retirement (wherein they lived with incredible joy and contentment) were mightly greeved and afflicted, for noe other thing could satisfie or comfort them, all worldly pleasures and earthly joyes were irksome to them: and in fine the most part of the like life was more odious than death it selfe, which they would willingly suffer for Christ; if ye heretickes would executte cruelty on them in the case, as in ye said privation they did. But seeing they could not attaine to that happinesse (because that after ye said chastisement sent by God uppon ye destroyers of ye convent of Bethleem, the heretickes used ye Nunns with greater respect) they considered how dangerous it was for them to live out of cloister among seculars, in a Country whose heretickes had all magesteracy and Government, which for Religious persons and especially for Nuns, is as for fish to be out of ye water. Wherefore as many of them as could gett meanes for it, left their parents, friends and native soyle, and undertooke ye perill and toyle of travile by sea and land, to shunn the aforesaid, with many other spitiruell inconveniencies, and to seecke a shelter in strang Countryes, wherein they might enjoy ye sweet imbracements of their celestiall Spouse after which they were languishing".

Our chronicler, who was able to visit many religious houses in Spain, took note of what happened subsequently to her Sisters. As a former abbess she had a very personal interest in many of those who emigrated.

First she singles out the famous pioneer, Sr. Cecily Dillon, abbess first in Dublin, and then in Bethlehem and Athlone. She evidently remained the leader of her own particular group which went to Spain. The Spanish authorities feared a spread of the plague and delayed the Irish from landing. The year was 1653. "Soe as the venerable mother Cisley, who was very weake and sickely by the aforesaid toile, dyed in the shipp, before the said dayes were expired to the great greefe of many, for the great



*Inscription on the tomb of Mother Catherine Bernard Browne, Madrid*

want of all ye Irish nunns of her order had of her, for whose reduceing together shee undertooke that journey".

Within a few months two more of the Athlone community followed her to the grave: Sr. Margaret Evangelist Moore and Sr. Cecily Joseph Burke.

Next recorded as dying, on 5th October, 1654, was her own sister, Catherine Bernard Browne. She died in the odour of sanctity in Madrid in the Conceptionist convent popularly known as Caballero de Gracia. The contemplative Order of the Immaculate Conception had been founded by St. Beatrice da Silva in 1484. Their nuns first came to Madrid in 1512, and throughout the many changes of residence in the city they always brought the body of the Irish refugee with them. A later chronicle says that her body was found to be incorrupt about forty years after her death. The inscription on her tomb which lies at the entrance to the choir is in Spanish, and it runs: "Here lies the Ven. Mother Sister Catherine of St. Bernard alias Broun, formerly Abbess in the Convent of Galway, of the First Rule of Saint Clare, in Ireland. She died in Madrid in the Convent of Caballero de Gracia on 5th October, 1654, having fled from the heretical Tyranny of the English. Her father was Don Andrew Broun, and her mother Helen Linch (sic!), leading and pious People of the noble City of Galway".

The contemporary chronicler goes on to record the death of Sr. Catherine Francis Browne, first Galway postulant at Bethlehem. She died in Bilbao on 24th June, 1668. "And though dureing her aboade in Spaine shee lived among urbanists, yett did shee never forgoe to observe ye first rule".

Over six months later Sr. Margaret Clare Jennings, one of the founding Sisters of Galway, died in Madrid on 15th January, 1669. The community "never found her but ordinarily in crosse, saying her prayers on her knees, with her armes in crosse.

And this custome of haveing her armes in crosse was such that as shee was agonizeing and speechlesse, shee would be streching them out in crosse. It is the "cros fighil" or practice of praying with arms extended which goes back to early monastic times in Ireland, and is mentioned in the Rule of St. Columban.

Two others of the Galway community are recorded as having died at an early age in Malaga. One was "Sister Elizabeth Baptise, alias Lynch, of whome her confessour testified that in his life he never treated with a purer soule than her". The other, who left from Galway as a novice, was "Sister Clara Colet alias Christian Blake, who dyed dureing ye yeare of her probation, and yett at her one earnest request, the Provinciall lycenced to professe her, that shee might have ye great meritts thereof. Soe shee professed the first rule of St. Clare, though the convent wherein she dyed was of a different order".

The last of the Galway community, whose death in Spain is mentioned, is "Sister Julian Anthony alias Blake, native of ye Towne of Gallway". She died in the monastery of St. Clare in Orduña. We can let the chronicle speak for itself: "One thing is, that being alwayes very backward in speakeing the Spanish language, some dayes before her death, shee spoake it as eloquently as if shee had beene a native of ye said Country; by which (not knowing an Irish confessour) shee could without any difficultie expresse her conscience with whatsoever else shee pleased in Spanish. And was soe jocond and glad to be dyeing, that shee caused to play uppon a harpe for her, and together therewith to sing Te Deum Laudamus, at which ye community tooke such delight that each one said interiorly, what sweetnesse is this wee feele, it is to be in Glory or assisting at a good death".



*Saint Clare*

## CHAPTER VI

# In hiding

Not all the Poor Clares fled from the country following Cromwell's edict of expulsion. Some stayed at first with relatives or friends in Galway City before coming together once more as a community. Indeed, as we shall learn from a later source, some of the Sisters returned from Spain to join their companions in Galway when they were afforded the opportunity.

Among those who remained in hiding in Galway was the first abbess of the Galway community. Her tombstone in the Franciscan graveyard carries this inscription: "1672. Here lieth the Body of the R. Mother Maria Gabriel alias Helen Martin, first Abbess and religious of the poore Clares of Galway, who died the 14 of Jan. adged 68, in religion 40. Pray for her Soule".

The Cromwellian regime proceeded to copper-fasten the military defeat of the Irish. There was a period of large-scale confiscation of lands. Catholics were forbidden to live in walled towns and, even more, to exercise trade in them. Galway was no exception. The lands of "Oilean Altanach" were acquired by one of the confiscators, John Morgan, mayor of Galway in 1660s. The Poor Clares were without a home and must have barely continued to exist on the fringe.

And yet they did not lose sight of their old home. The records kept in the Galway monastery are not always precise in giving dates. However, we glean from them that at some point "Sisters Ellis and Elizabeth Skerrett farmed the said Island and house from the said John Morgan, and payed him rent thereout for some yeares".

We are surely meeting again the two ladies from Aughtrim who joined the Order around 1644. It would seem from this that the community was able to return to "Oilean Altanach" and live in that part which had originally been granted free of rent by the Galway Corporation. That grant was evidently a bone of contention for a long time. A Sister Ellis Font appeared with witnesses before the Commissioners sitting in Loughrea to assert the nuns' claim to the property. And Elizabeth Skerrett, as abbess, took the extraordinary step of going "to London about this affaire, in behalfe of herselfe and community with great toyle and troble, and obtained confirmation of said grant from Madam Hamilton and Coll. fitz Patrick, as it was granted to the said Convent in ye Merallty of Sir Walter Blake Knight Anno 1648". Elizabeth inherited the business-like qualities of her father, Edmond Skerritt, who was described by the

Provincial in 1643 as occupied in many "great engagements". Madame Elizabeth Hamilton had been granted the Corporation lands by Charles II in 1673, so it was necessary to enter a counter-claim in regard to that part which legally belonged to the Poor Clares.

In her recollections Sr. Mary Baptist Clancy, a Galway Poor Clare who went to Limerick in 1817, fills in some details. "Times being more peaceable, two of the Nuns took courage and went to England to petition the Queen, one of them, Sr. Skerret, being cousin german to Lady Hamilton, one of the Queen's Ladies of the bed chamber, and through her interest they obtained a grant of a few acres of their own Island, to feed a couple of cows for them. They returned home in great joy and soon got possession of about five acres, where they planted a garden and built a small lodge for such of the Sisters as might want a change of air".

During Sr. Elizabeth Skerret's period in office as abbess we have records of her receiving various girls into the Order. On 26th March, 1684 Fr. James Darcy authorised her to receive two postulants, one of them specifically named as Letitia de Burgo. And on 28th June, 1687 Fr. Anthony de Burgo granted her permission to receive three girls to the habit, one of them Cecilia Kirwan who would later help to make a foundation in Dublin.

Elizabeth was followed in office by Sr. Gabriel Skerrett, who had been professed in 1677. She would experience great disturbance during the Williamite wars, when the Poor Clares were once more obliged to leave their island home. A letter of the Provincial, Fr. Edmund Delany, dated 28th August, 1690, is worth quoting in full: "Whereas the RR Mothers and Sisters of St. Clare's Order of the convent of Galway have exposed to me that through the miserys of the tymes they are reduced to such extremitys that they cannot subsist together in cloyster and thereuppon desired my leave to dispers among their relations and freinds. These are therefore to permitt and licence the said Religious Mothers and Sisters to dwell with their said freinds and relations where they may (be) better provided for, herby chardging their consciences to live as neere their Rule and constitutions as they conveniently can, and alsoe declaring that in necessity they may eate meate".

In the following year the community was dispersed and the convent burned down by the Williamite army.

The disturbed times made it necessary for the Provincial, Fr. John Baptist O'Donnell, to grant a blanket permission to receive novices on 25th June, 1695: "I doe by vertue hereof authorize the Rev. Mother Abbesse of ye poore Clares of Galway, Mary Gabriel alias Skerrett to admitt to the yeare of probation as many as shee and her discreets will approve of, and will finde qualified with the conditions required in their owne Rule and constitutions". This was confirmed on 17th August, 1697 by the next Provincial, Fr. Anthony O'Kelly.

It must have been some time in the closing decade of the 17th century that the nuns, after their dispersal, acquired the large house in Market Street. They would stay here secretly as a community until their return to Nuns' Island in 1825.

Around this time, too, one of the Bethlehem Sisters makes a brief appearance on

the Galway scene. She is Sr. Anne Fitzgerald, niece of the deceased abbess, Cecily Dillon. On 21st June, 1696 the Provincial assigned her to the Galway community. She and another (presumably Sr. Francis Luttrell) were the only surviving members from Bethlehem now living in Ireland: "Whereas also there are but two of ye Nunns of Bethlem now in ye Kingdom who live disperst and doe not keep together, and ye rest of them in parts beyond ye seas and that ye Nunns of Gallway keeps together in ye Towne of Gallway and live there Religiously in a Community according to their order...I have therefore and doe hereby order by ye Approbation of ye Definitor and ye other hear undernamed Ecclesiastical persons and all ye consent and at ye instance of ye said Comunity of Nunns of Gallway and Anne fitz Gearald one of ye said Nunns of Bethlem that ten pounds be paid to ye said Comunity of Gallway of ye said Arreares for their present reliefe and towards ye mentenance of ye said Anne fitz Garald whom I have ordered to recide and live with ye said Nunns of Gallway".

The Archives at Nuns' Island in Galway have two distinct but similar letters from Fr. Anthony O'Kelly. They are undated but must have been written early in 1698. He authorises the Sisters to leave the country when an opportunity offers itself, since all nuns are to be banished from Ireland before the 1st May next. He warns that those who support the Sisters, inside or outside their own homes, will have all their goods confiscated.

We have no indication that the nuns did go into exile after this new threat. The Provincial and most priests did. However, the elderly were spared, as Fr. Anthony de Burgo says when giving an authorisation to the abbess on 13th August, 1698. The letter gives us a flavour of the times: "Whereas by the constitutions and statutes of our Order of St. Francis, all the Nunnes of the said Order are required to have the Provincial's special order for professing and that the miseries and calamities of this Kingdom hath banished the said Provinciall with the rest of his Order, onlie such as are bed ridd and weake, and that in his absence I being the eldest in Profession and dignity of the said Order in this Province, and thereunto impowered and lycenced, I doe give you Sister Mary Gabriel full power to give their profession unto Sisters Margrett Nolan, Joan Lynch, Nell Lynch and Briggitt Daly when you thinke fitt or convenient".

The disturbed times created problems for the community and the abbess. It would seem that the normal election of the abbess was suspended and that she was appointed directly by the Provincial. The Sisters appear to have questioned her authority. The abbess, Sr. Mary Gabriel Skerrett wrote on 15th May, 1699 to the Provincial, Fr. Anthony O'Kelly now exiled in Louvain. In his reply of 12th July he stated very clearly: "I instituted you then Praeses after yr time, as I doe now by these presents, and doe desire, nay doe command by vertue of wholesome obedience, if necessary, that none, subject to us, shall presume to give you ye least contradiction in this our will, and if any may attempt the contrary, she, or they, may repent, and this very soone".

The letter is addressed to: "Mrs. Mary Gabriel neere Mr. Ambrose Ruisse ye



Apothecary's house in Galway, or in her absence to Mr. Jerome Martin in ye same lodging in Ireland. Shepe St. Galway".

Although the Treaty of Limerick tolerated Catholic worship, the authorities hoped to suppress its practice by the banishment of priests. It is reckoned that 190 priests left through the port of Galway. But there was still a loophole in the law. Priests ordained abroad could legally come into the country. A new Act was passed in 1703 to close the gap.

It is in this interim period, before the Act of 1703, that we find a new Provincial, Fr. Bonaventure Collyn, writing from Belaclare in Co. Galway on 20th May, 1701, advising the abbess to continue to receive applicants to the Order: "Deer Mother, I think it were farr from charity to disapoint the well affected towards the holy Mother St. Clare, though tymes be dangerous and troublesome. Therefore to encourage the well disposed mindes to serve the Lord, I doe by these presents authorise Thee to receive to yr Society as many as you think fitt, well qualified, desireing all the mothers and sisters to be herein satisfied".

Since the letter is addressed "To The Rd Mother Mary Gabriel alias Skerett, Abbess of the Convent of St. Clare Galway", it must mean that the Sisters were living together as a community. However, they kept boarders in order to conceal their identity from the civil authorities.

Sr. Cecil Francis Kirwan was abbess in 1707, to be succeeded by Sr. Mary Anthony Skerrett. There were fifty members in the community by 1712.

Though confining ourselves to the story of the Poor Clares in Galway, we must turn our attention very briefly to Dublin. In June 1712 six of the Sisters, with Mary Augustine Lynch as their abbess, were invited to make a foundation in the capital. All was done in great stealth in order to avoid the attention of the civil authorities. However, their identity was discovered within a couple of years, and the convent was raided in 1717 and the nuns brought to court. This led to a similar raid on the convent in Galway. The community was dispersed from Market Street. The nuns were once more in danger of banishment. In the next century the Dublin community, through the practical needs of the time, would evolve into the Order known as "The Sisters of St. Clare", with their widespread apostolate of education. Their vow of enclosure was changed into a vow to teach poor girls in the city. The Order still draws its inspiration from St. Clare.

The year 1717 gave cause for alarm. The visitor to the Franciscans in Ireland, Fr. Anthony French, wrote to the Minister General on 23rd October. His concern was for both the Galway and Dublin communities: "The present government has raved so furiously against them that they are obliged to scatter and often take refuge in the homes of their relatives...If this government continues, it is to be feared that they will not be able to live together permanently. In number there are sixty virgins consecrated to God". He asks the advice of the General as to their being accepted in some other country. Given the chance, he says, they would very willingly go abroad.

The General, Fr. Joseph Garcia, replied on 7th March, 1718, addressing himself to the Provincial, Fr. Anthony MacNamara. He confindes himself to the Galway

community. The Provincial, on the advice of Anthony French, is "to select eight of the younger members from the professed nuns of the aforesaid monastery (royal subsidies are not sufficient at present for a greater number), choosing those who are more active and competent to serve the community which charitably receives them". In the event, it does not seem that any of the nuns chose to emigrate to Spain.

Meanwhile on 13th October, 1714, the Provincial Chapter appointed Fr. John Cunegan as confessor to the Poor Clares. This formal appointment in Chapter had not been registered since 1650, although it may have continued in reality. It was something which the Sisters clung to very tenaciously.

The Archbishop of Tuam adverts to the matter in a letter of 24th August, 1714 to the Apostolic Internuncio in Brussels. As Vicar General of the archdiocese "we ordered them (the Poor Clares in Galway) to accept none of the clergy to hear their confessions unless specially approved by us. But the said Nuns bitterly opposed us, and no amount of reasoning could bring them to submit to us, for they alleged that it was unheard of that whoever was appointed as their confessor by the Seraphic Province should seek any approval from the Ordinary, hence they confessed only to the parish priest nominated and commended to them by the Provincial before his departure".

After the raid on the convent in Market Street in 1717, the house had been turned into a military barracks. The Sisters continued to live in small groups with their relatives, clothed as secular people but in some way retaining a religious form of life. A later chronicler, Sr. Mary Baptist Clancy, tells of how some of the nuns hankered after their former style of life and of a nostalgic visit to the convent at midnight.

"A kind friend living next door, Mr. Ambrose O'Connor, harboured five or six of these poor Nuns, some being nearly related to him. Providence inspired them with a desire to get in before midnight to say Matins in the Choir, as those few were so near the convent. Mr. O'Connor supplied them with candles and paid the sentry to let up the Poor Ladies to say their prayers for one hour. He agreed to the request, and they read their Matins and Lauds as usual, which so frightened the soldiers who occupied the cells that they complained next day to their officers that they were disturbed in the night by the Ghosts of the Nuns who were praying, and that they could no longer sleep in a house that was haunted. The Convent was then deserted and the poor Nuns ventured to come forth from their hiding places and once more take possession of their habitation".

The Sisters seem to have re-occupied the dwelling in Market Street before 1731, again in the guise of keeping lodgers, for it was raided that year by the sherriffs. However, the nuns had already fled and the officers found only a few young lodgers on the premises.

On 9th March, 1743, Thomas Shaw, mayor of Galway, was able to report from an informer "that there are three nunnerys belonging to the town as he hears and are called Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians. Knows not how many are in each".

Though greater tolerance is said to have been exercised after 1745, Stratford Eyre, Governor of Galway and one of the old school of hardline officials, reported in some dismay in December 1747: "There are six friaries and nunneries, two popish chappels, eight popish schools, above thirty papists to a Protestant".

Protestant free-holders were increasingly unwilling to serve as jurors in cases brought against their Catholic neighbours, and the penal legislation became impossible to enforce. Still, as late as 1755 Lord Limerick proposed a bill that would expel from the country any unregistered priest after 1st January, 1759; and a fine of £100 would be imposed on anyone hearing the Mass of such priests.

We have said that some of those who went to Spain in the aftermath of the Cromwellian wars returned to Galway when it was thought to be feasible. Our informant in Fr. Anthony Mac Hugo, a former Provincial who had been guardian of the friary in Aran from 1717 to 1720, and in the course of a statement he says that he was confessor to the Galway Poor Clares for three years, that is, from 1719 onwards. The long statement in Latin, preserved in the Archives of Dún Mhuire, Killiney, deals primarily with a problem concerning the Poor Clares in Dublin. It was written in Meelick on 11th January, 1752, and much of it throws light on the Sisters in Galway. He speaks from personal experience.

"Let all concerned know that the Nuns of the Order of St. Clare, since the time they set foot in Galway around the year 1651 (sic!), spread the fame of their holiness and religious piety widely. And although they were frequently dispersed through the difficulties of the time and because of heresy, and some of them were banished abroad and transported to Spain, where one or other of them died with a great fame of holiness, some of them, however, returned after a while, and joined with those who remained secretly in Galway. Like fruitful olive trees in the house of God, they have remained here to the great edification and advantage of the citizens and of the whole country. Nowhere could I find nuns to be compared to them in uprightness of conduct, austerity of life and the example of other virtues. For many years they observed the enclosure strictly and inviolably, though without a grille, until they were forced to leave their dwelling and seek refuge with relatives and Catholic friends, because of the craftiness of Satan and the enemies of the Catholic Religion, as well as the open violence of the functionaries of the civil authority. Despite this, after surviving the fury and storm of heretical persecution, as often occurs, they returned home, and strictly observed the common life together in the choir, the refectory and other places. None of them was allowed to go out without the tacit or express permission of the Minister Provincial; not even the Abbess unless with the consent of the discreets and when a great social necessity urged it. Perhaps because of these persecutions and the threats of magistrates, the excuse of tacit permission grew in the absence of the Provincial, but they did not use this except for a reasonable cause".

After speaking of his term as confessor to the Galway Poor Clares, "with fifty in the community, and hence several of the nuns were seventy, others eighty years old, and more than fifty or sixty years in religious life", he continues: "Among them I

found some ladies of such piety and devotion that to me they seemed to be leaders and masters of the contemplative and spiritual life rather than learners; indeed, when I saw their fervour I often felt ashamed of my lukewarmness".

It would be nice to think that when the old-time chronicler, Mary Bonaventure Broŵne, sent various gifts back to Galway, including her story of the Irish Poor Clares, she made use of some of the nuns who returned from exile to Ireland.

A letter from Fr. Edmund Darcy, dated 3rd November, 1785, is addressed to "Mrs. Ursula Mooney, at Market St. Boarding Sch., Galway".

In 1813 the Protestant Archbishop of Tuam gave to the abbess, Sr. Brigid Clare French "full leave and licence to keep and teach a school in said Town of Galway, within our said Diocese, for the Education and Instruction of Children of Papists, or persons professing the popish Religion".

Then on 16th January, 1825, the Provincial, Fr. William Aloysius O'Meara, "in the names of the Nuns of Dublin, Limerick and Galway" sought and obtained from the Holy See certain dispensations from the Divine Office and fasts, since "many schools for the instruction of poor female children were instituted in Ireland, entrusted to the piety and zeal of the holy Nuns of the Order of St. Clare".

Involvement in education, however elementary, has been incidental to nuns of the contemplative life. Circumstances would demand it for Catholic instruction in case of need. The Poor Clares of Gravelines in France, Alma Mater of Nuns' Island, undertook the christian instruction of children whose faith was in danger during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Despite the above indications, there is a strong tradition that the Galway Sisters never made use of the permission to run a teaching establishment.

In 1817 three Poor Clares from Galway, including Sr. Mary Baptist Clancy, went to Limerick to assist in a school established there by their fellow-Sisters from Dublin in 1812. The venture was to prove unsuccessful. This is generally thought to have been due to poor administration, but an over-frequent change of personnel may have been an added cause. One of the Galway nuns who gave her services to the end, Mary Baptist Clancy, died on 19th December, 1830, and lies buried with three other Poor Clares in the quiet of the cemetery attached to the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy. The project ended in 1831.

## CHAPTER VII

# The return home

Sr. Mary Baptist Clancy, who had lived at Market Street since 1770 and who was abbess there in 1816, tells of the return of the Poor Clares to Nuns' Island: "But our present excellent and zealous Provincial, the Rev. Fr. William O'Meara, who is indefatigable in his exertions ever since his appointment, to promote the good of the Order (God bless him), on his first visitation at Galway, saw the state the poor Nuns were in, went to look at their island, and found it an eligible, airy and wholesome place for a convent, and finding, on examining their funds, that they were well qualified to build, obliged them immediately to employ an architect to undertake the business, who in less than two years for the sum of £3,000 completed a beautiful Convent, Chapel and Poor School, all under one roof, and now, thank God, the entire community removed there on the 18th of this month of June, in the year of Our Lord, 1825".

Sr. Brigid Clare French was abbess at the time. The specifications for the new building refer to a "School House" in 1823, and later in 1828.

A rather eccentric nun, Sr. Mary Baptist Haverty, who had been a Poor Clare in Galway and Dublin, and then an Ursuline in France, wrote to the abbess in June 1857: "What a pity you don't sell your Island property, step across to sunny France, purchase a small property here and transfer your Convent where I am very sure you would be much happier; but you should have a school; and be under the mild and holy jurisdiction of the Bishop of the diocese; all the convents in France have that happiness at present, a happiness I most sincerely wish you. I wonder will the revs. Hughes and Hogan be provincials in Heaven. I do not think they shall. I am very sure saint Francis will not give them his sisters".

This suggests that at that time the Poor Clares in Galway were not interested in teaching. The reference to former Provincials recalls that she had stormy relations with several of them as a Poor Clare.

The building which had been described as "a beautiful Convent" did not live up to expectations. An architect, Alexander Hay, lists many features of bad design and poor workmanship on 2nd January, 1829. It is a report on "the building erected at Nuns Island better known as the Franciscan Nunnery". Seemingly the title "Nuns'

Island" was coming into use only at this relatively late date.

After transferring to Nuns' Island the Sisters more and more organised themselves into a praying community. On 25th June, 1835 the bishop of Galway, Dr. George C. Browne, wrote from his residence in Dominick Street, giving permission to the abbess, Sr. Catherine Lynch, to have Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. He signed his letter: "Yr dutiful son, and added: "The Franciscan Order have been always particular favourites of mine".

Scanty records make it difficult to trace the growth of the community. We are told on 10th February, 1863, that the community consisted of six nuns.

However, two novices were added to the community in 1865. A visitation report on 28th August, 1888, shows that the community had grown to sixteen, including one choir novice, one lay novice and two lay postulants. The abbess at this date was a person who had a deep influence on the spiritual growth of the community, Sr. Mary Joseph Hyland. Some account of her throws light on the customs of that time.

Teresa Hyland applied to join the community in October, 1866, with a limited dowry. She offered herself with £100 plus expenses incurred at reception and profession. The abbess, Sr. Mary Clare Kealy, consulted the community. The answer was negative. The sum must be £150 plus expenses. Teresa's father could not advance anything more, and the matter remained deadlocked. Then later in the month the community accepted a compromise: £100 plus expenses for reception, profession and clothes, as well as £10 to cover the first fifteen months including novitiate. £50 would be brought on arrival. There was a delay in mid-November. Miss Hyland could not come until her "fortune" was available. In February 1867 the abbess reported that Miss Hyland would bring a mattress, and also silver tea spoons which were preferred for cleanliness and safety, though not insisted on. On 6th March, 1867, the abbess wrote to the Provincial: "Miss Hyland has arrived, and was met at the train by two friars, Fr. Brennan and McGrath". She was received as a novice on 13th June, 1867. It is nice to note that her father and two sisters attended the ceremony.

The question of a dowry preoccupied the nuns to a certain extent. Some postulants brought £250 with them in those years, but the amount was reduced in the case of suitable postulants. There were limits, of course. A Miss Egan, who applied in February, 1867, had lived for some years in Paris, was thoroughly acquainted with foreign languages, was an excellent pianist and well skilled in English literature, but had no "fortune". She was not accepted.

In extenuation we should remember that the Holy See had for centuries insisted that all religious Sisters should have a dowry, so that communities would be economically viable.

The Visitor General to the community, Fr. Isidore da Boscomari, declared on 27th October, 1867: "the ordinary dowry required for Postulants to be the aforesaid £500 sterling, exclusive of the expenses necessary for Reception and Profession". However, the community by secret vote could accept a suitable applicant who had not the entire amount.

We have delayed over what now seems an irrelevant problem, because the Galway community was gradually moving towards the total elimination of dowries. In a request of 20th April, 1919, the Sisters unanimously petitioned the Holy See to dispose of money from dowries, "so that we may be free to embrace the state of strict poverty observed by the Communities of Poor Clare Colettines. We have ascertained by experience that it is not only possible but easy to support ourselves without the aid of such dividends and revenues and by other means conformable to our Holy Rule to enjoy even a certain abundance in keeping with our state".

In reply the S. Congregation of Religious was guarded. Permission was granted "for this time only", but the dowry system should be re-established in keeping with Canon Law. However, by 1925, the requirement of dowries had fallen into desuetude.

It was a movement which would have gladdened the heart of Mary Joseph Hyland. It was during her period as abbess that the Minister General, Fr. Aloysius Lauer, wrote on 2nd August, 1885: "The great Cloister asked unanimously by the Community will be given after a bit". And his successor, Fr. Bernardine dal Vago, wrote on the following year: "It is also our wish and earnest desire that as soon and as far as possible strict enclosure be introduced into your Convent". He also approved of steps to introduce a more strict observance of the Rule of St. Clare, and midnight Office was to be recited on the principal feasts of the Church and the Order.

Changes were wisely introduced step by step. Some later miscellaneous jottings record: "2nd February, 1890. Permission for Cloister was granted by our Superiors and Most Rev. Dr. McCormack, Bishop of Galway". And again: "16 July, 1892. Poor Clares of Galway took up cloister of their Rule. Also midnight office, fasting with other parts of the Rule". The "cloister" appears to have a varied degree of meaning.

The leader of much of this renewal, Sr. Mary Joseph Hyland, died in 1909 after travelling to Dublin for medical reasons. She collapsed outside the Poor Clare Monastery which she visited before returning to Galway. She was taken into the enclosure and anointed. Her Death Certificate notes: "Died 2nd January, 1909 at St. Damian's Convent, Donnybrook. Aged 69 years".

It marked the end of an era. She had achieved much in her lifetime, and her work is still fondly remembered in Nuns' Island.

There were, of course, the daily irritants of community life in those far-off days. The Provincial, Fr. Joseph P. Cleary, idly noted at Visitation in July 1881: "The Office is too quickly said". "There is want of charity". "Some speak to the servants without necessity". And "Sister C. makes a disagreeable noise with her throat both in choir and at Chapter".

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, authorised for a few hours each day in 1895, was extended from early morning until late evening in 1923. This focus of contemplation draws its inspiration from St. Clare who, like St. Francis, adored her Lord hidden in the Eucharist, the ever-present Viaticum of Christians.

1895 also marked the laying of the cornerstone of the Extern Convent. Church law had long regarded Extern Sisters as a separate body which assisted the enclosed religious. They are, since 1961, an integral part of the Poor Clares, sharing in their prayer-life and taking an active part in all Chapters of the monastery, including elections.



In passing, and it really deserves more than a passing note, we can remember that the Galway community took two initiatives outside their own surroundings. In 1934 six Sisters went to England and established a monastery of the Order in Southampton. And in 1951 five of the Community made a foundation in Australia, first in Sydney, and later transferred to Campbelltown. It is in keeping with a long tradition of the Poor Clares to look far afield and to introduce the wholly contemplative life into other countries. The pattern of the Order, which existed in the lifetime of St. Clare, is continually being reproduced.

In 1973 the Galway Sisters united with the six other contemplative Poor Clare Monasteries in Ireland, and three in Great Britain which had been founded from Irish houses, to form a Federation. All the monasteries remain autonomous, but help each other in areas such as formation, personnel and finances.



## CHAPTER VIII

# 350 years after



*Our Lady of "Bethlehem"*

As the Sisters go on their way to the choir they always pass by a relic of earlier times. It is the wooden statue of the Mother and Child, Our Lady of Bethlehem. The third abbess of Galway, Mary Bonaventure Browne, who was also a member of the Bethlehem community, mentions it in her chronicle. The soldiers "sett fire to ye Convent, and burned it with all that was therein, onely that God preserved miraculously the Tabernacle in which the Most Blessed Sacrament used to be kept in the quire and wherein the said holy Sacrament was, when they prayed before it, with the aforesaid fervour to be delivered from their enemies, and likewise an old Image of our Blessed Lady both made of wood".

In some way, despite all their enforced movements around the city from 1653 until 1825, the Poor Clares kept this precious relic of Bethlehem safe and sound. The three-foot statue formed part of an exhibition of Irish wood sculptures at the National Museum of Ireland in 1948.

It serves to remind them of their forebears of Bethlehem who "prayed continually, for while they laboured with their hands, they used to be many times saying some kind of prayers in common, answering one another therein quirewise. They observed such sylene, that midday seemed midnight, and they had mutuall

charety to help and comfort one another; raised continually at midnight to say Matins and never eate flesh, nor wore socks, shoose or stockins, but contented themselves with wooden soles or patens under their feet, haveing a list nailed above to hold them on, and observed all other things ordained by ye first rule of saint Clare with the stright statuts made by saint Colett upon said Rule".

In essentials nothing has really changed from Bethlehem to Galway and since their first arrival three and a half centuries ago: prayer, mutual charity, work, the midnight Office, the abstinence, the various austerities. The framework within which these contemplatives live is basically unaltered. It was fashioned by St. Clare in her Rule and so has an enduring quality.

It would be a distortion to see it as a way of life turned in on itself. If there is a contemplative dimension, there is also necessarily an apostolic dimension.

The Poor Clares have never lived far from people. Even their local situation emphasises this aspect. San Damiano where Clare lived all her life lay close to Assisi and its towns-people. It drew them towards that first monastery, the cradle of the Order. Nuns' Island reproduces what St. Clare had in mind: a seclusion that is open to the needs of those who live within the surrounding areas.

The Poor Clare lives at the source of apostolic fruitfulness. Her mission is to love. The seclusion of the monastery gives her space to be an apostle of prayer, an apostle of praise, an apostle of penance, an apostle of support in faith and in solidarity with others in their various walks of life. In this way the religious of Nun's Island reach out and touch the lives of others.

In her fourth Letter to St. Agnes of Prague, St. Clare makes a request: "In this contemplation, remember your poor mother". The contemplative is never so involved in the affairs of God that she has no thought of others. It is precisely then that she sees the needs of others in God.

Nuns' Island and Galway have always felt an instinctive need of one another. The relationship has always been strong and affectionate. This anniversary of the foundation in Galway so many years ago is a happy time to reflect on that mutual bond.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*We wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the staff of the Connacht Tribune, particularly Mr. J. P. Cusack, for his many visits to us to help and advise while our History was being prepared for printing. Likewise to Mr. Joe O' Shaughnessy, photographer for his ease and expertise in this field.*