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Neighbors & Missionaries: A History of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine

Margaret M. McGuinness

New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012

230 pages, \$40

Reviewed by Rev. John W. Friesen, University of Calgary, Alberta

On June 5, 2010, the Sisters of our Lady of Christian Doctrine, founded by Marian Lane Gurney (later known as Mother Marianne of Jesus), celebrated 100 years of ministry. In this book Margaret McGuinness commemorates their long history of Christian service in quietly descriptive language with strong undertones of deep admiration.

The story begins with the conversion of Marian Gurney from the Episcopal faith to Roman Catholicism, much to the consternation of her parents. As a student of Wellesley College, Marian's various spiritual inclinations were closely watched by faculty members who notified her parents that their daughter was showing "Popish tendencies" (p. 21). Marian's volunteer work in settlement houses convinced her that her life's vision to help the poor could best be realized through the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, to the chagrin of her parents, Gurney became a Roman Catholic and soon began to formulate plans to establish a new order known as the Institute of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine. The dual purposes of the order would be religious education and sacramental preparation.

Although only 40 years of age at the time of founding the new order, Gurney forged a formal document of agreement with the sisters who joined her company, "promising and agreeing to live in poverty [and] chastity," in non-cloistered form in order to perform religious service (p. 40). Mother Marianne's vision to save the city of New York gained a physical foothold on May 1, 1911, when she and her colleagues established Madonna House, modeled somewhat after Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago founded more than 20 years earlier. The key difference would be that the sisters' mission had strong religious underpinnings.

The target ministry of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine was multifaceted. In addition to providing Christian education and classes in sac-

ramental preparation, they ministered to war veterans and immigrant communities, operated a bread line for the unemployed, and helped local residents in need of basic living essentials. Clearly the work of this astounding order was “varied and adapted to meet the changing needs of the large population in which [they] were surrounded” (p. 69). In 1924 they were able to procure a neglected piece of property in Nyack, New York, which they named Marydell Motherhouse and Novitiate. The property became a place where the sisters could rest and make retreats. It was at once a fortuitous and much needed development that no doubt spurred the sisters on to more expanded ministries.

Like all institutions founded in the early 20th century, the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine adapted to the changing realities of American life through the Great Depression, World War II, postwar economic growth, and the monumental cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s. By the mid-20th century, settlement houses were becoming less relevant as government social agencies gradually filled the slack among the needy. By 1960 the sisters found it necessary to cease their settlement house ministries and close both Madonna House and Ave Maria House. Not to be deterred by this development, however, the sisters simply relocated their ministry to New York’s Lower East Side and the Bronx. Several sisters pursued a college education, including the attainment of graduate degrees, and continued to provide religious education in parish schools or serve as social workers. These dedicated servants of God were not to be frustrated nor deterred from their mission simply because of socioeconomic changes.

During the 1940s, Mother Marianne found herself administering a contingent of sisters outside of New York—in South Carolina. She wrote to the sisters regularly, reminding them that the rules of the order applied to them in every detail. She cautioned the sisters about traveling with priests unless it was absolutely necessary, presumably to prevent anti-Catholics from making inferences about impropriety. She had to make adjustments to sisters’ dress when they found their originally mandated apparel much too warm for the South Carolina climate. Mother Marianne continually offered advice about good eating habits, warned the sisters about drinking possibly contaminated milk, and offered instructions about fasting during Lent.

Despite expanding the mission of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine to South Carolina, it eventually became clear that the order was not attracting sufficient recruits to handle their responsibilities. Additional pressure to maintain the order arose because pastors became aware of the caliber of the sisters’ ministry and invited them to provide aide to struggling congrega-

tions. Thus the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine initiated ministries in several African-American communities, and though their efforts were well received, they soon found the demands on their time exceeded their energies. As an aside, in one African-American community the sisters found themselves working with a scout troop by providing them with breakfast after Mass. One young girl who did not like the look of the scrambled eggs being served refused to eat them. Finally, being persuaded to try the eggs, her eyes beamed with pleasure at their good taste so that she was led to exclaim, "Sister, give me some more of those Catholic eggs...they sure are good!" (p. 128).

The turbulent 1960s brought new challenges to the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine, as they engaged in a variety of new congregational challenges involving camp meetings, racial segregation, and reverberations of Vatican II. The death of Mother Marianne on February, 9, 1957, had a significant impact on the order as they struggled to maintain their mission. But it was not to be. By 1980 there were only 51 professed sisters in the community, and far-reaching challenges were at hand. Sister Ursula, Mother Marianne's successor, found it necessary to remind her cohorts that religious life is not a democracy; it is a theocracy, meaning that God rules, "and the superiors just uphold the place of God" (p. 155).

The ministry of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine was not without inconvenience and opposition, and although McGuinness does document these, they are not detailed. For example, American bishops were slow to approve settlement house ministries, parish priests accused the sisters of draining money from their parishioners, the sisters were accused of "unpedagogical teaching" (pp. 86-87), and Mother Marianne found it necessary to inform a bishop in South Carolina that "women religious were no longer placidly accepting decisions made about their ministries by others" (p. 131).

On June 5, 2010, however, some 700 people gathered at St. Anne's Church in Nyack, to celebrate a century of inspiration and faith with the sisters who, at the end of the festivities, faced three major points of discussion: care of their elderly and infirm members, dissolution of properties held by the order, and possible merger with other orders. Their testimony is secure.

Even for a Protestant such as me, an inspirational story of this magnitude can only inspire awe and admiration. I am honored to have had the opportunity to read this powerful story.

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