



## Margaret Aylward

### Foundress of The Sisters of the Holy Faith

Margaret Aylward was born at 11, Thomas Street in Waterford on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1810. Her father, William Aylward, was a wealthy pork merchant and owned his own ships, while her mother's family had extensive property. Her mother's only brother, John Patrick Murphy (Uncle Murphy to his nieces and nephews) was a Christian Brother, a prominent member of Edmund Ignatius Rice's young Congregation.

Since there were no schools in Waterford in this post famine era for the children of the Catholic middle class, Margaret attended a small private Quaker school. On her way to and from school she saw children who were living in poverty, hungry, barefoot and uneducated standing outside shops and at street corners begging from passers-by. Her reaction to their emaciated bodies and outstretched hands developed into a lifelong concern for children and families who were destitute.

She continued her education as a boarder with the Ursuline Sisters in Thurles until the age of 19 years. Trade had been declining for some time in Waterford and the townspeople were experiencing great hardship. Margaret helped her father to administer a low-interest loan scheme for the needy.

Margaret had family links with the Presentation Sisters who had established a 'poor school' in Waterford for girls. She went to work as a volunteer lay teacher in these schools. The Christian Brothers undertook to do for the boys what the Presentation sisters were doing for the girls. Margaret saw how the Christian Brothers in Waterford combined family relief and tuition for boys living in poverty. Alongside her voluntary work in the Presentation poor schools she worked in a charitable pawn shop designed to protect the households struggling to exist from the exorbitant rates of interest charged by regular pawnshops. Her involvement in her father's business, in his charitable outreach and her association with the Presentation Sisters and Christian Brothers developed a strong business acumen and ingenuity to underpin her deep compassion, her appreciation of the gift of faith and commitment to open free schools where none existed. She knew the business world and this helped her when later she came to Dublin

In the mid 1840's, Margaret came to Clontarf, Dublin, to stay with her brother, John. The poor people in Dublin opened her eyes. Margaret saw homeless hungry children, barefoot and ragged, roaming the cold unfriendly streets of Dublin.

She was impressed by the work of the Ladies of Charity in Dun Laoghaire, an offshoot of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, whose guiding vision was the teaching of St. Vincent de Paul on charity. The Ladies had a definite sense of Christian commitment, with time each week for prayer and visiting the sick poor in their homes. This appealed to Margaret. For her to be a Catholic was to combine the love of God with service to the people struggling with poverty. One was impossible without the other. By May 1851, Margaret had founded a branch of the Ladies of Charity in St. Kevin's Oratory in the metropolitan Parish Church of St. Mary's, Marlborough Street.

The Ladies of Charity discovered how extensive the problem of orphaned children was. Margaret never liked orphanages. The Ladies of Charity knew there were plenty of farming families in Wicklow and Kildare who would take a child into their homes and who could then attend the village school. The foster mother was paid seven pounds a year in two installments and the family was visited twice a year to see that the child was happy and so started St. Brigid's Orphanage in Eccles Street, Dublin. The orphanage was not a residential institution, but a long term family fosterage system for destitute children in danger of loss of faith. She believed that her support for the family and education for the orphan helped build up the fabric of society. For Margaret the gift of faith and the question of Irish identity was at stake, *Upon this one thing, the education of the poor, depend the future of Ireland, the future of society*. (Orphanage Report 5:1861)

Margaret saw family fosterage as a last resort. If financial help enabled the family stay together, Margaret and her Ladies stepped in with some funds or self-help projects. *'God has built civil order upon the family, and if it be well ordered, society will be healthy and prosperous'*.

Since there were no schools in the Temple Bar for families experiencing severe poverty, in October 1861, Margaret, with the support of Fr. Gowan C.M., established the first school in Crow Street, Dublin. This was followed by a second school in 1863 in Great Strand Street. A third school was opened in Park Street. Each of the poor schools operated an outdoor relief system where many families were kept alive by the food and clothing given them at these schools. The network expanded to the Coombe (1865), Glasnevin (1865), 65 Lower Jervis Street and Clarendon Street (1870).

Margaret Aylward and Fr. Gowan saw there was a need for a group of women who were prepared to make a life commitment. Young teachers were now coming forward through the schools to help give stability and continuity to the work. In 1867, Margaret and her fifteen companions were overjoyed when they were approved as a religious congregation. They were to be known as the Sisters of The Holy Faith. Fr. Gowan shared Margaret's passion for the education and care of the destitute child and family in danger of loss of Faith. He was Margaret's spiritual director and friend and helped steer the fledgling congregation. *'It is indeed a glorious thing to devote our time, talents and energies to the preservation of the faith'*. (Orphanage Report 91:1867)

Margaret was constant in her desire to do God's will in every respect. *'During the day have I kept myself recollected in the presence of Jesus Christ, everywhere keeping his intentions before the eyes of the mind?'* was a question she sought to answer in her daily prayer. *'If circumstances prevent your assisting (at mass) at any time, at least unite yourself in spirit, at the hour of Mass, with the Spirit and heart of Jesus Christ'*. (Points Document, 3<sup>rd</sup> Point)