

Chapter 12

Sisters of Charity

Introduction

- 12.01** In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Troy, wanted to establish a religious community of women to serve the needs of the poor in the city, similar to the Daughters of Charity who worked in France.
- 12.02** His coadjutor, Dr Murray, met Mary Aikenhead, and he thought she was ideally suited to carry out this plan. In 1812, Dr Murray sent Mary Aikenhead and a companion to begin their training in the religious life to the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary run by the Loreto Sisters in York, England. The rules of this Institute at that time were based on the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), and the initial formation of Sr Mary Augustine, as she became, were based on Ignatian spirituality.
- 12.03** Sr Mary Augustine and her companion, Sr Mary Catherine, returned to Dublin in August 1815, and Dr Murray appointed Sr Mary Augustine as the Superior of the new Community. The Sisters made the usual three vows of religion – chastity, poverty and obedience – and an additional fourth vow to devote their lives to the service of the poor. The following year, Dr Troy canonically established the new Institute under the title of ‘Pious Congregation of Sisters of Charity’.
- 12.04** Soon after its establishment, the Sisters began their visitation of the poor, and found that the Rules of the Constitution of the Society of Jesus which they had chosen to follow were not suited to the type of apostolic life of their new Institute. A new Constitution was drafted by Sr Mary Augustine, with the assistance of a Jesuit Priest, and was submitted to Rome for approval in 1824. The Rules and Constitution were deliberated on in Rome during the pontificates of Leo XII and Pius VIII, but it was not until after the accession of Pope Gregory XVI that they were finally approved in 1833.
- 12.05** The original documents remained unchanged until 1917, when the Constitution was revised and modified in line with the new Code of Canon Law. The next revision took place in 1971, in accordance with the wish of Vatican Council II, and an Interim Revised Constitution was approved by Rome and put to the General Chapter of the Congregation in 1977. The Congregation felt that another draft was necessary, as they considered that the new Interim Constitution did not reflect the early Ignatian spirituality. A Congregational Committee was formed, and a new Constitution was drafted using the original 1833 Constitution and key parts from the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. As the new Constitution was drawn from the original document, a second contemporary document was drawn up to encompass the teachings of the Vatican II Council and this was entitled ‘The Complementary Code to the Constitutions.’¹ The new Constitution was circulated to the members of the Congregation in 1980 and, over the next three years, it was revised and edited and prepared for submission to the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome in April 1984. It was approved in August 1985.

¹ Complementary document.

- 12.06** In 1995, it was recognised by the General Chapter that the Complementary Code needed updating and, after a wide-ranging consultation process throughout the Congregation, a new Complementary Document was produced in 2001. The Sisters used the Jesuits' document 'Complementary Norms' to assist them in the production of this document.
- 12.07** Today, the Religious Sisters of Charity have around 150 communities in six regions and two provinces, spanning four continents. They continue the work of their founder, Mary Aikenhead, in three ministries: education, healthcare and pastoral/social. The Sisters of Charity in Australia are a distinct Congregation since 1842 with their own Congregational leader.

Governance of the Congregation

- 12.08** The Congregation is centrally governed by a council known as the General Chapter, which is the supreme law-making body in the Institute and is based in Dublin. This is headed up by an elected congregational leader with the assistance of her council. A congregational meeting is held every six years to elect a leader and council, and to deal with the affairs of the Congregation. An important duty of the congregational leader is to make Visitation to all of the Sisters in their various residences and ministries every six years. She may delegate this task to one of her council.
- 12.09** There are three regions and two Provinces headed up by a Provincial/Regional Leader who, with her team, provide the link between the local communities and the central government. She is appointed by the congregational leader, who consults with the Sisters in the region/province to find the most suitable person. The leader must visit all of the Sisters in their residences and ministries ordinarily every two years, except in the year when this is done by the congregational leader or one of her assistants.
- 12.10** The Sisters live in the local community to which they are assigned, and a leader is appointed by the provincial/regional leader, following consultation with Sisters in the community and subject to the approval of the congregational leader with her council. The community leader is appointed for three years, and may be reappointed for a second or third term in exceptional circumstances only.
- 12.11** The congregational leader, with the consent of her council, has the power to remove the local superior from office for a grave reason.
- 12.12** Chapter 4 Section 232 gives an insight into the type of person that should be considered for the role of community leader:
3. Care should be taken that whoever is appointed to the office of superior be a person of great virtue, edification, self abnegation and one whose obedience and humility are well proved. She ought to be discreet, suitable for governing and experienced both in practical and spiritual things. She should know how to mingle firmness with kindness at the proper times and have patience and endurance in bearing the responsibilities of her office. Finally, she should be one in whom the higher superiors can confide and to whom they can with security communicate their authority. For the greater this delegated authority will be, the better with the houses be governed and the works of the house promoted for greater divine glory.

The community leader must also appoint a mistress and bursar to assist her.

- 12.13** She must give the rules which relate to her office to each Sister, and take care that no one interferes in the business of another.

- 12.14** The mistress acts in the absence of the community leader and also makes provision for the material things needed for the community. The bursar administers the property and funds of the house and keeps an account of income and expenditure.

Recruitment

- 12.15** In the past, the Sisters of Charity recruited two types of Sisters: superior degree Sisters and second degree Sisters. Second Degree Sisters who entered the Congregation were confined to 'domestic employment suitable to their vocation'. They were required to be 'content with the occupations of Martha' and interiorly to 'esteem all as being superior to themselves, and, with religious simplicity and modesty, to give each one exteriorly the honour and reverence which her station requires'.

- 12.16** The Rules of the Religious Sisters of Charity provided as follows in relation to second degree Sisters:

10. Finally, let them remember, that as the peculiar office of those in the superior degree is to promote the end of this Congregation, by instructing the poor, visiting the sick etc. etc. so their own peculiar office, is to employ themselves in whatever lowly of humble occupations may be allotted to them; persuading themselves that by aiding the Congregation in these offices, in order that the other members may, with less interruption attend to their own peculiar duties, they serve the same Master of all, our Lord Jesus Christ; since they do so for love and reverence of the Divine Majesty. With as much humility and charity as possible, let them be ready to perform with great exactness the office assigned to them. Thus they will not only receive the reward of their own fatigue and labour, but likewise become partakers in all the good works which God, to the praise and glory of His holy Name, may vouchsafe to effect by the ministry of the whole Congregation, and in all the Indulgences and spiritual favours which the Apostolic See has graciously deigned to grant for its members, for the advantage of their souls.

...

20. When any one admitted into this Congregation has received one degree, she must not seek to be advanced to another. Let her endeavour to acquire perfection in her own; employing herself wholly in the service and for the glory of God, and leaving the care of all other things to the Superior, who holds the place of Jesus Christ our Lord.

- 12.17** Today, the Congregation Manual states that each Sister and each local community must take responsibility for encouraging vocations and, in each part of the Congregation, there is a formation team, whose members are the Provincial/regional leader and the Sisters who are appointed to direct the formation of candidates, postulants, novices and the members, both in temporary and perpetual profession.

Apology

- 12.18** The Sisters of Charity were involved in five industrial schools, including St Joseph's and St Patrick's, Kilkenny and Madonna House, Dublin.

- 12.19** The Sisters of Charity have never issued a general public apology in respect of child abuse. However, the Congregation has issued three specific apologies relating to the criminal convictions of three of its staff, one in Madonna House and two in St Joseph's, Kilkenny.

- 12.20** The apology in relation to Madonna House was issued in 1994 and read:

The Religious Sisters of Charity are deeply concerned and saddened by what has happened to the children at Madonna House. We offer our heartfelt apology to each and

every person who has suffered in a situation where we tried to ensure that they would experience warmth, care and support.

- 12.21** The second apology was issued at the sentencing of a male childcare worker in St Joseph's in 1997:

While other Orders might have found that the States of Fear programme or other publications or broadcasts was their moment of realisation, I think it was the criminal conviction of that child care worker that was a very significant moment certainly for me and those other sisters who attended and for the congregation subsequently. For us it was a brutal initiation into the reality of sexual abuse of the most deprived kind. While I would have read the Garda statements that the children made against this child care worker, it became very real when the boys were asked to speak in Court and they described a most horrific litany of terror and hurt and humiliation and pain and powerlessness. It was at that moment I think for us as a congregation it became real. I am not saying we accepted it or understood it, but it became real for us then.

- 12.22** The third apology was issued when another childcare worker from St Joseph's, Kilkenny was convicted. It read, inter alia:

We are appalled that a care worker employed at St. Joseph's for 9 months from '76 to '77 abused children in his care and we are offering counselling services etc.

He came to St. Joseph's as a qualified care worker, had excellent references from his former employees in the UK, and was interviewed by representatives from St. Joseph's and from the Department of Education ...

Peter Tade's² abuse of the children at St. Joseph's has caused untold misery for the men involved. Nothing can make up for what happened to them and we deeply regret their suffering.

- 12.23** Sr Úna O'Neill, Superior General of the Congregation, told the Investigation Committee at The Public Phase I hearing on 7th February 2005 that:

The issue of making a public apology didn't really arise for us. Our response to the emergence of the allegations was twofold. When we received the allegations through legal means we responded to them legally through our solicitors. At the same time we were trying to respond pastorally and that pastoral response was a continuation of what had been happening on the ground with the Sisters who had actually been in these childcare homes. Many of our past residents have maintained their contact with the Sisters who were their carers and that continued and I think some of the Orders have expressed the way in which that continued.

- 12.24** Sr O'Neill stated that the Sisters provided two aftercare centres and a fund for past residents:

past residents of our schools can apply for help for ongoing education, for counselling for themselves or their families, grants for those who are experiencing particular problems, with regard to family health, employment, accommodation, contributions towards funerals and burials for those who may not have immediate family, grants for those who may want to set up a little business or whatever, for those who are searching for parents or siblings, and for reunions and holidays.

- 12.25** Sr O'Neill said that the Congregation contributed to the Redress Fund:

we had a number of civil cases before the Court at that time ... We had had the experience, I had the experience of attending these court cases and I had seen what that

² This is a pseudonym.

process had done particularly to the men who had taken the cases against us. I had spoken to them about the experience with both of them. I saw what it did with both the volunteers and the staff who had to testify. There was a strong pastoral reason for us not subjecting anybody to that kind of process if we could avoid it.

We also felt the definition of abuse was so broad that it would invite many more cases against us and in fact that has proved to be the case. There has been a very, very significant increase in the number of cases that have come in from 2000 up to today, very significant increase for those that had come in beforehand.

We also felt that if we didn't contribute to the scheme, maybe we were wrong in this, we felt that perhaps the Redress scheme would give a partial payment to the children and then they would seek the rest from us through legal means and that would have been the same reason as I have given beforehand.

The same thing again I suppose the cases before the courts take a very long length of time as we had experienced and we felt that if the Redress scheme to which we could contribute could be up and running it would mean that those cases would be heard much more swiftly than in the courts. It was our view that this process would be preferable to our past residents and to the staff and sisters than going through the difficulties of the court system and also of course that the substantial amount of money that would be expended in legal fees could be avoided if we did contribute. We felt it would bring finality to all of that.

- 12.26** In their Final Submissions to the Investigation Committee following the hearings into St Joseph's, Kilkenny and St Patrick's, Kilkenny, the Sisters of Charity submitted that the sexual and physical abuse that was perpetrated on the children in these Schools was inflicted by parties other than members of the Congregation. Therefore, they stated, 'the issue of making a public apology did not arise for the Sisters of Charity'.
- 12.27** They stated, however, that 'the Sisters of Charity are absolutely and deeply sorry that any children in their care were abused in any way'.
- 12.28** They accepted that 'A certain number of children suffered appalling abuse'. They also submit that the manner in which the Sisters organised and ran their schools led to the risks and incidence of child abuse being minimised and to appropriate action being taken when abuse was discovered.

