

Mother Mary Ignatius Hayes and the Arrival of the Poor Clares in America

Sr. Camille Sarno

TO MOTHER MARY IGNATIUS, controversy was the "stuff of life." Nothing she did or accomplished during her lifetime was devoid of controversy. And nowhere is this more evident than in the coming of the Poor Clares to the United States. The broad outline of this story is familiar to us, but the convolutions involved before the final unraveling make one stand in awe at the mysterious, incomprehensible ways of God.

Within a year after establishing her Institute at Belle Prairie, it became evident to Mother Ignatius that she had chosen too vast a mission territory with too few priests available to serve the needs of the Church. The renowned missionary, Father Joseph Buh, had been pastor at Belle Prairie since 1865 but frequently had to leave his parish unattended for weeks at a time. Deprived of the sacraments, mass, and spiritual direction, Mother Ignatius decided it was time to take matters into her own hands. She knew that Bishop Thomas L. Grace had tried unsuccessfully to get Franciscan friars to help in the wilds of Northern Minnesota. She was also acutely aware that she could not continue her work in the United States without well-trained Sisters to help in the apostolate. In a letter she wrote to a Cardinal in Rome, dated May 4, 1875, she stated that ". . . a great number of vocations among women of good will were coming to us but ... they were completely ignorant of the history and traditions as well as the spirit of religious life. .."

And so with the blessing of Bishop Grace, Mother Ignatius set out for Europe in 1874 in her quest for young women interested in becoming members of her Institute. She would also try to obtain Franciscan friars who would not only evangelize the area but would serve as chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of her Sisters. Eventually, the friars did make a foundation in Minnesota, though not in Belle Prairie. Once again, the part played by Mother Ignatius in this episode of Franciscan lore is open to debate. However it came about, the testimonial of the Minister General of the Friars Minor, Father Bernardino de Portogruaro, dated April 6, 1875, states that ". . . she [Mother Ignatius] came to me looking for Franciscan Fathers for the mission. She also desires to bring back with her some Sisters of the Third Order...."

Seemingly, Mother Ignatius had chosen a propitious time for the recruitment of religious to take back with her to Minnesota. Italy was in turmoil, since Garibaldi had captured Rome in 1870 and Pope Pius IX became the "Prisoner of the Vatican." With the demise of the Papal States, fear spread among Church groups that the new Italian government would seize more church property by suppressing monasteries, convents, and other religious houses. Numerous diocesan clergy, monks, and religious began to look elsewhere for the establishment of their communities. Given such circumstances, it would appear that Mother Ignatius would be able to get recruits for her new Institute in America. She had stated, in the letter of May 4 already quoted, that she wanted only ". . .three or four nuns ... called by God to devote themselves to a hard and difficult mission. ..."

But third order Sisters were hard to come by. One can only conjecture why those communities contacted by Mother Ignatius were unwilling to take up the challenge: the language problem; the distance; above all, the cultural difference. Then from an unexpected quarter came the ray of hope denied her for so long. A Poor Clare nun, a certain

Mother Pasiutta, from the Convent of St. Clare in Palermo, expressed interest in going to America. Was it this offer from Mother Pasiutta that first made Mother Ignatius aware of the benefits to be gleaned from having a "powerhouse of prayer" established in connection with her own Institute? What surer means of bringing down God's blessings on her active apostolate than by having a contemplative Order associated with hers! It was a novel idea with a double solution: she would get her "mature religious" plus the service of a regular chaplain, since assuredly a Franciscan friar would be assigned to help with the founding of a Poor Clare monastery in America. It is well to mention that during the French Revolution (1789-1814) an attempt was made by three Poor Clares from Amiens to found the first Poor Clare monastery in the newly formed United States. The story of their travels, labors, and subsequent failure was written by Pedro Badab, a Havana Sulpician. His work was published in English in 1936 (Desobry, Father Jean. "Bicentennial of a Poor Clare Odyssey." *The Cord*. July-August 1993, pp. 211-217).

Wasting no time as was her wont, Mother Ignatius began her search for the recruiting of Poor Clare nuns who would establish the Second Order of St. Francis on the mission shores of America. She visited several Poor Clare monasteries in Rome and its environs, and found many Sisters who were at least interested in hearing about her offer. When it appeared that several of these Sisters were actually contemplating accompanying Mother Ignatius to the United States, objections from various channels of jurisdiction were strongly voiced. The Minister General of the Friars Minor, to whose spiritual jurisdiction the Poor Clares were subject, would have to give his approval of the undertaking, as would the Cardinal Prefect for the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and also the Cardinal Vicar of Rome. The final seal of approval would have to come from the Holy Father. Even before any of these permissions could be sought, there was the question of the individual Sisters themselves who might be chosen for this venture. Their motives for wanting to go as well as the state of their health had to be considered. Also to be considered was their ability to adapt to hardships and privations and their willingness to face the permanent severance from family and country. What seemed a rather simple project had now become an almost insurmountable problem.

With her customary aplomb and determination, Mother Ignatius set about removing or circumventing obstacles, both ecclesial and personal. A visit to the Minister General of the Friars Minor convinced him of the viability of her plan to bring Poor Clares to Belle Prairie, where they would devote themselves to a life of prayer while the Sisters of her Institute would continue to engage in the active apostolate. Both Communities would retain their own religious identity and would follow their respective Rule and Constitutions. In her "Chronicle of Events of Our Holy Order," Mother Maddalena Bentivoglio wrote: "The names of several religious whose monasteries are dependent on the Minister General were presented but only three names were selected, one from the monastery of San Cosimato and two from San Lorenzo because the other nuns had great opposition from their relatives, confessors, friends, ..." (Sisters Frances Ann and M. Ellen O.S.C. "Mother Maddalena Bentivoglio, Foundress of the Poor Clares in the United States." *The Cord*. May 1980, pp. 142-147). The Minister General appointed a Franciscan priest to accompany them as chaplain and to attend to their spiritual needs when the Poor Clare monastery would be established in Belle Prairie.

At this point, historical perspective becomes blurred and conjecture replaces irrefutable fact. Who made the final decision as to which Poor Clare nuns would accompany Mother Ignatius? Was it the Bentivoglio Sisters who offered themselves for this mission? Was it Mother Ignatius who showed a preference for them? Was it the Pope who chose them? According to the article from *The Cord* already referred to, Sisters Frances Ann and M. Ellen wrote: "His Holiness selected the Bentivoglio Sisters to accept the challenge." Yet in her "Chronicle," Mother

Maddalena says that it was the Minister General, her ecclesiastical superior, who desired that she should go. "When I saw him, he put some questions about it and upon my answers he said to me: 'I would say to you to leave this very night; I am so sure that He is calling you.'" One further question teases the imagination: What became of Mother Pasiutta?

Criticism, obstacles, charges, counter-charges did not prevent Mother Ignatius from accomplishing her purpose. Her hope of a strong, spiritually stable Institute depended on her dream of establishing a Poor Clare monastery with strict enclosure as an adjunct to her already established Institute without enclosure. She continued to petition the Holy Father, implore the Minister General, beseech the Cardinal Vicar, and enlist the aid of clerics and bishops on the American side of the Atlantic. A poignant passage in her "Diary" dated April 21 best describes her distress and determination: "A day of anguish! Quite upset! Will no one take the responsibility? So little faith! Saint Francis, Saint Clare, did they act so? In my anguish at all this uncertainty, prayed for a solution."

Her importunities and perseverance finally convinced the ecclesiastical authorities of the viability of her plan, and one by one the parts fell into place, including the appointment of Father Paolino da Castellaro as the Franciscan chaplain who was to accompany the Sisters to Belle Prairie. Reluctance on his part did little to mitigate the joy of Mother Ignatius as she set about making preparations for the trip to America. All was officially settled, and the Right Reverend Rupert Seidenbush, Vicar Apostolic of Northern Minnesota, was notified by means of a papal rescript that Mother Ignatius' petition had been granted and that Mother Mary Maddalena and Constance Bentivoglio, accompanied by Father Paolino da Castellaro as their director, were coming to make a Poor Clare foundation in Minnesota. The rescript closes with the commending of the "above-mentioned persons" to Bishop Seidenbush, that "through the work of these Sisters who have received the special blessing of His Holiness, a new splendor will accrue to the Catholic faith" in his vicariate.

Not much is known of the fifteen-day voyage across the Atlantic, for Mother Ignatius' "Diary" is mute on this point. However, Mother Maddalena wrote glowingly in her journal of the wonders of the trip, including the clemency of the weather and the kindness of the captain. One can only surmise about the discussions which took place during the voyage between the Poor Clares and Father Paolino and passengers, who surely must have queried them about their destination. It seems now that even before disembarking in New York, Father Paolino had made up his mind not to accompany Mother Ignatius to Belle Prairie. He longed for his native country, and he did not need much prompting from the Franciscan Fathers in New York to write to the Minister General requesting permission to return to Rome. Within twenty-four hours of their landing, Father Paolino had to notify the Bentivoglio Sisters of his decision not to go to Belle Prairie.

Mother Maddalena wrote in her "Chronicle": ". . . He told us that he had made up his mind not to continue his journey with Mother Ignatius but to remain in New York until he should hear from Father General ... that if we wished to continue our journey to Belle Prairie we might do so, he would not oppose us, but that if we took his advice, we should do what he was doing." How to describe their feelings? Consternation, dismay, distress-and finally the decision to write to the Minister General, explain their predicament, and await his answer. The following day brought a repetition of these feelings when Mother Maddalena and her sister were faced with the unpleasant task of breaking this news to Mother Ignatius. What does one say to a person who surmounted the objections of a Pope, the Minister General of a great Order, the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, and other ecclesial authorities to achieve what was considered a well-nigh impossible goal? No one will ever know, because Mother Ignatius committed none of her thoughts to paper. Her "Diary" makes no mention of this heart-

rending end to what was to have been a glorious beginning. Only the words of Mother Maddalena in her "Chronicle" give an inkling of what she truly felt. "We begged her not to bear us any ill since it was not our fault. Poor Mother Ignatius felt the refusal very much, yet having no binding claim upon us, she resigned herself to the inevitable and departed from us with grief and sorrow in her heart."

These few words record the climax of a unique venture, but they are words that unwittingly contain the seeds of greatness and perseverance: "she resigned herself to the inevitable and departed from us." She wasted neither time nor energy in recriminations and lamentations, but returned immediately to Belle Prairie. Soon after, she left for Canada to recruit both alms and postulants. One can gauge the success of this undertaking by an article that appeared the following year in the *Little Falls Courier* which began: "On last Wednesday morning the 2nd inst. (August), Feast of Our Lady of the Angels, commemorated in the Franciscan Order by the celebrated indulgence of the Portiuncula, five young ladies received the religious habit of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi, in the Convent of the Immaculate Conception at Belle Prairie."

When Mother Mary Ignatius returned to Belle Prairie, Mother Maria Maddalena Bentivoglio and her sister, Sister Constance, remained in New York waiting to hear from their superiors in Italy as to what they were to do. They waited for months for a letter from home, and when one did arrive, they were simply told to find a diocese willing to accept them and then to write to Rome for official documentation to make a foundation. Their first visit was to Cardinal McClosky of New York, who told them their form of life was "against the spirit of the country." The response was similar from church authorities in Philadelphia, even though the Archbishop initially received them with kindness and gave them the use of one of his own houses for the foundation. They took possession of the house on October 7, 1876, but were informed by the Archbishop on October 27 of the same year that he could not retain them in his archdiocese. He did allow them to stay in the house until they could determine what to do. Then, unexpectedly, but certainly due to Divine Providence, they received an invitation from Archbishop Perche of New Orleans. A foundation was made there on March 14, 1877. The Archbishop assured them of his good will and protection and encouraged them in every way. Their troubles were not over. On December 14, 1877, they received a visit from a Father Gregory and Fr. Kilian, who informed them that they were authorized to tell them that a number of German Poor Clares were on their way to Cleveland, that they were to be joined to them, making a fusion of the two communities. And so it happened. However, they could not accustom themselves to the German language and customs, age being a factor in this. Besides this, there were certain rights which had been directly conferred upon them by their Superiors in Rome, rights they were not obliged to renounce until they were taken from them by those who had granted them. Therefore, they wrote to the Archbishop of New Orleans, asking him to receive them back into his diocese. They got an immediate reply telling them to return by all means. Before doing so, they decided to attempt to collect funds to purchase a proper site and to build a regular monastery. While engaged in this work they met a wealthy Catholic couple, Mr and Mrs. John Creighton of Omaha, Nebraska, who were willing to help them. Right Rev. James O'Connor, Vicar Apostolic of Nebraska, although he could personally offer them no financial assistance, was only too well pleased to retain them, provided that a kind benefactor would build a monastery for them and establish them on a firm footing. And so it was that Mother Maria Maddalena and Sister Constance, with the help of Mr. and Mrs. Creighton, founded the first permanent monastery of Poor Clares in America. On July 5, 1882, the canonical enclosure was established, and the Sisters began to observe fully the strict Rule of their holy Mother, Saint Clare. To complete this story, Mother Maddalena, accompanied by two other Sisters, returned to New Orleans on June 16, 1885. The new monastery there was completed in 1891, and the Sisters gladly took possession of it.