

Encounters During the Sojourn in Jamaica

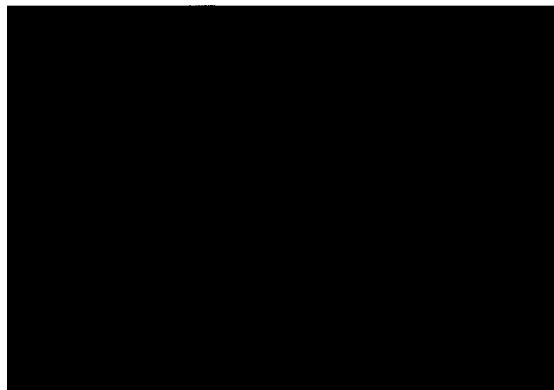
Sr. Moya Byrne

People and events that become part of our lives shape us, and for this reason we must count the Jamaican experience as particularly formative for Sister Mary Ignatius. She wanted to be missionary. With what enthusiasm she left her Bayswater community, made a further novitiate in Glasgow, and then, in spite of cautions from the well-informed Bishop Smith, left immediately for the realization of her missionary call! As she disembarked at busy Kingston Port that December day, she was immediately thrust into a new society. Gaily clad black wharf labourers unloaded her steamer; finely dressed ladies and gentlemen had come in carriages to meet the ship. Was she aware of how living so close in a town divided so racially and socially would affect her attitudes and values?

We may be sure that she envisaged a vast field for her endeavour. Later she would hear of the circuit rides of Father Dupeyron linking up Catholic settlements over the whole island, and of the town apostolate of Father Dupont which led him amongst the tiny hovels of those same labourers who were now carrying her trunk down the gangway. Jamaica then, as it does today, offered a wonderful field for this missionary viewing it with a generous heart.

Yet in God's plan, Jamaica was not to be her mission. It seems that from the beginning Sister Mary Ignatius had a desire for ministry different from the sisters she found in the Duke Street convent. Her convictions were not formed by this community, who had arrived two years before her and set up a school for the daughters of wealthy Catholics. We could ask why these Franciscan sisters, who in Glasgow had been so zealous for the education of poor girls, failed to give Sister Mary Ignatius the realization of her dream. Her disillusionment is reflected in the Journal she kept at this time. Why was her missionary call so different from theirs? Why could she not find an apostolate among the poor? The answer seems to lie in the different call she was experiencing, a call made actual by the people and events that were influencing her in Jamaica.

The Jamaica of 1859 had a very mixed population. The 1850 census estimated the population as 400,000, of whom only 15,000 were of European origin. Evidence from the journal kept at this time shows that most of her community's relationships were with people from the European group-in fact, it seems that they met only members of the 5,000-strong Catholic body, and among them very few of African origin.



Yet the real face of Jamaica was of an island of great contrasts. One hundred years before her coming, the English had built up Kingston, the capital, as one of the four greatest slave trading centres of the world! Ships from Africa called first at this port, where the prosperous plantation owners purchased the best of the human cargo for labour in their fields and houses. These "owners" would consider their financial outlay well repaid if the slave's life lasted five years. How many human beings were sacrificed in this way to the greed of the Europeans' desire for sugar products is unknown, but certainly when the slaves were emancipated in 1833 (the trade in African slaves was abolished officially in 1807) there were still 250,000 existing in a pitiable condition.

By the decade when Sister Mary Ignatius arrived, people of African origin numbered a total of 385,000 out of a total population of 400,000, but this growth did not reflect prosperity. Neither their economic nor their social position had improved in the intervening twenty years.

But there were some who recognized the injustice meted out to these former slaves. Baptist ministers had been foremost in promoting social liberties for them, and one of their number, Gordon, had been elected to the Jamaican parliament. However, racial tension was running high in the decade of the sojourn of Mother Mary Ignatius, and in 1865 this same Gordon was to be hanged by a martial-law court for his alleged part in a racial uprising. A 1991 Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Samuel E. Carter cites the Rev. Gordon as one of the heroes in Jamaica's fight for recognition of human rights. How much were Sister Mary Ignatius's racial attitudes affected by a contemporary discussion of the rights of all persons? In fact we could ask, what did the future foundress know of the plight of these poor? She wrote in her journal during these years: "An incessant longing to work for the poor dwelt in my heart and was the subject of my prayers . . ."

Mother Mary Ignatius was no stranger to work with the poor. She taught poor students during her time in Wantage and in the Charlotte Street convent in Glasgow. In fact, in a letter drafted at this time in her journal she seemed to be advising the person to remain in Glasgow rather than expect to find a poor apostolate in Jamaica. It could have been that the enclosure observed in the Duke Street convent inhibited more direct work for the poor. Perhaps it was in the resolution of the nuns to labour for the well-to-do Catholics, many of whom were descendants of those who fled the 1793 French Revolution's religious persecution in Haiti. We know that at least two of the new Jamaican recruits of the community were of the Haitian-French culture. The Duke Street Academy was for the daughters of the wealthy.

Yet there was a poor school in Kingston. Historians describe Vicar Apostolic Dupeyron's concern for the poor, and his giving over to the sisters the administration of St Joseph's school for poor girls, the year Sister Mary Ignatius arrived (Delany, 1930, page 65). In the draft of a letter, which could not be earlier than 1862, written to Father Dupeyron and found in the Journal, Sister Mary Ignatius writes, "There are not more than 15 children in the PS. [Poor School?] and your return is awaited to propose our giving it up. 8 in the Day School owing to ... a new arrangement [that] has been made in the Boarding School by which the better class of Day Scholars as ED and the Malakees are taken with the Boarders-only 8, and thus remain a mission without work for the poor and sick-doing little or nothing for the place in which we live has not a very enticing aspect."

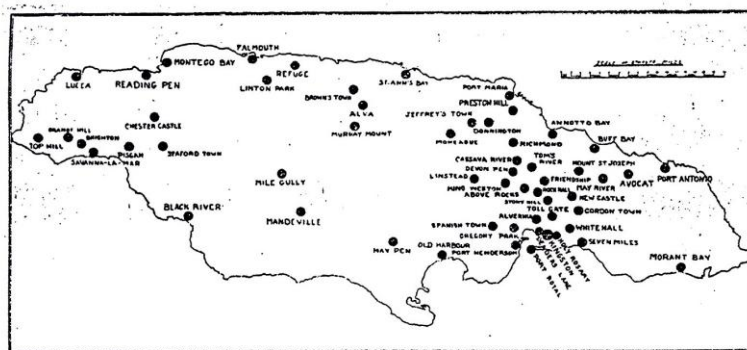
This was the missionary who had answered all the Glasgow Bishop's arguments: "I go neither to place or person-simply God calls me to leave my home and country and to join a foreign mission. If the time were to come over again I would do just the same." Clearly her vision was developing independently of her companions in the convent. It is interesting to look for other patterns of ministry that might have influenced her.

Jamaica had experienced a succession of zealous priests since the English government had relaxed its laws on the Catholic religion. Of the clergy in the previous fifty years, Fernandez, a political refugee from a South American revolution, who stopped over in Kingston while escaping, was the most famous. He discovered that there was no priest on the island, so he stayed for thirty years until his death, battling the prejudice against foreigners and caring for his flock in spite of his imperfect command of English. The memory of the schism within the Catholic flock, during his charge of vicar-apostolic, was still fresh even in Mother Mary Ignatius's time. The sisters, like all the parish community, were well aware of this division created by the insubordination of a Father Murphy. That the value of union was well known to the foundress can be seen in these words: "To see the Religious life founded in a generous, broad and noble spirit, that was my desire — flourishing in a loving, generous, joyful spirit; to see union and trust and confidence in its members."

A generation before the coming of Sister Mary Ignatius, Fernandez was joined by two Jesuits from the English province: Collins and Dupeyron. During the next thirty years, Dupeyron was to set up a system of visiting the scattered settlements all over the island, thus initiating a mission outside the capital city. As Dupeyron was the religious superior during the stay of Sister Mary Ignatius, we may be sure that she was aware of his missionary work. Collins in his turn was the reconciling figure with the congregation of St Patrick's church, the group that had originally repudiated the authority of Fernandez.

Another Jesuit who was to touch the lives of the urban poor at this time was the French-born Dupont. Like Sister Mary Ignatius, he had always longed to work in the missions, and arrived in Jamaica in 1847. Clearly he was much more successful than she in finding a missionary apostolate. His name was to become a household word for nearly half a century down the narrow lanes, in the yards, in the hovels of Kingston, and in the nearby bush country. It has been said of him that his charity embraced all, because he had the gift of being at home with the poor in their native surroundings and of identifying himself with their daily problems. To all he was jovial, friendly, and deadly serious about their temporal and spiritual well-being.

The memory of Fernandez, and the example of the Jesuit missionaries, could not but have provided a contrast to life in the convent. In this context, it is interesting that the debate about what should be the focus of apostolate was being carried out in the Jesuit community too. There, the educational establishment, St George's, was continually short of personnel and money, because active pastoral work was favoured by the Jesuit superiors. The historian Osborne, commenting on this period in Jamaica, writes: "Unfortunately for education, parish work received the lion's share of men and money! But there was always a small group who fought hard to give education its rightful share in the scheme of things necessary" (Osborne, 1977, page 229). It seems that the sisters' establishment of the Immaculate Conception Academy reflected this concern to educate leaders for society.



MAP OF JAMAICA WITH MISSION STATIONS

For the future foundress, however, it was a situation that she eventually sought permission to leave. Because in her religious profession formula she had included a fourth clause, promising to spend her life labouring in the foreign missions, she could legitimately ask for redress of this situation, and in fact soon after her arrival in Jamaica, while Mother Veronica was still in Kingston, she seems to have been making inquiries about moving to a situation with a greater scope for evangelization.

But the years in Kingston were valuable. In spite of her failure to realize her dream, the sojourn in Jamaica proved to be a time of enrichment of missionary idealism, of deepening her awareness in regard to the plight of the poor in a milieu struggling with conflicting attitudes about racial issues and fundamental human rights, all of which positively affected her later apostolic planning.

We can be sure that the experience of being part of Jamaica's racially mixed population had its impact upon the future foundress. It is difficult to estimate to what extent the social and racial attitudes of Sister Mary Ignatius changed as a result of her sojourn in Jamaica. Yet, we must assume that the circumstance of a huge coloured population, socially and economically disadvantaged, and the ferment of opinion about racial issues, influenced her. The American Civil War (1861-65) was raging, and she could not have been ignorant of the central issues of this conflict.

Twenty years later in Georgia, she demonstrated her practical attitudes by helping former slaves to a better life. Moreover, she was to admit a young woman of African origin to the novitiate, thereby demonstrating a lack of racial prejudice. In contrast, the community in Jamaica never accepted women of non-European extraction, and it was not until the 1930's that one of their sisters responded to the desire of the bishop and founded a local institute to enable all women of Jamaican birth, regardless of race, to become Franciscan sisters.

As she observed zealous Church personnel dedicated to spreading the Gospel, Sister Mary Ignatius developed ideas about how a missionary institute needs to function. The foundress recognized that there was need for Constitutions that free the members to go among the poor. In her day sisters who acted thus were not recognized as religious. It required continuing dialogue with bishops if sisters were to be trusted with direct evangelizing. Sister Mary Ignatius recognized this, and was always careful to respect the authority of the Church in all her missionary work.

The convent in Jamaica was under diocesan authority, the superior being the Jesuit Vicar General, Dupeyron. Its chaplains were also Jesuits. For the first time the Foundress experienced a form of government different from her Franciscan Rule. Ordinarily, this would not have affected much the internal government of the community; however, the circumstance of the Prioress being overseas for so long that her term of office expired, required, according to the Franciscan rule, an election. From her Journal of these days, it seems that the Jesuit superiors saw no problem in an appointed superior. In this situation she saw a danger inherent in the lack of clarity within the constitutions observed by the Jamaican sisters, and she learned the importance of revision of constitutions so that they reflect both the spirit of the order and its ministry aspirations.

Desire to work for the poor, compassion for former slaves, desire for union among the sisters, care to have constitutions that help the missionary ideal, the ideal of missionary service were all very much influenced by the Jamaican experience and deepened and enriched the future Foundress. People she met and the events that happened there were truly formative. In the ten years that were to elapse before her own Institute was founded, these experiences proved decisive. It is evident, then, that the failure in Jamaica to find a missionary life, nonetheless, provided a rich background that helped to guide her and was an encouragement to her in her continuing love for the poor.

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