

Conclusion — “Creation”

Sr. Helene Byrne

*... and the Spirit of God moved over the waters. God said:
"Let there be light," and there was light.
God saw that the light was good and He separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light "Day," and the darkness "Night."
Genesis I: 1-5*

Thus begins the story of Creation, the action of the Holy Spirit, whose work continued to the "seventh day," but did not end there; it continues to give life and existence throughout time, down through the centuries even to this day.

One century when the creative power of the Holy Spirit was seen in very tangible ways was the nineteenth century, when the Church, society, special groups, and individuals found themselves driven by the Spirit, propelled into action by a force they could not ignore. One such individual was Elizabeth Hayes, born on the island of Guernsey on February 10, 1823. The eighth child of Rev. Philip Hayes and Thomasine Hayes, she was baptized an Anglican at the local church of St. Peter Port. Little did those present at Elizabeth's baptism suspect that the Holy Spirit had already singled out the little newly-baptized to be an instrument of His love and mission for countless others who in time would be touched by her ministrations and inspired by her life to follow her example and bring light and life into the lives of others.

Elizabeth enjoyed the warmth of a loving family as she grew to womanhood. The Hayes family had long cherished religious practice and loyalty. Education and service to the Church and to youth were among their priorities, as was a predilection for the priestly life as evidenced in the lives of her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, all of whose lives as clergy in the Church of England were most exemplary. It is believed that Elizabeth was educated by her father's sister, Miss Sophia Hayes, who ran a small select school called the Seminary, in Alley Street, St. Peter Port.

There is no record of the time and circumstances of Elizabeth's leaving home. Her first teaching position was at Blackheath, a suburb of London, where she came into contact with some of the leading lights among the Anglican clergy, not least among them the great Dr. Pusey, a man of exceptional intellect and academic attainment. He became a providential help for Elizabeth; it was on his recommendation that she moved to Wantage, Berkshire, in 1847, where his friend and follower, Rev. T. J. Butler, was vicar. Because of the prevalence of crime and the depravity of people's lives in Wantage, the town was called "Black Wantage." Rev. Butler was determined to replace the blackness of corrupt living with the light of God's grace and right living. The means he decided upon were two-fold: the restoration of Church life and worship, and education. To this end, he established a school Sisterhood to help with the poor, visit the sick, and work in the field of education. He regarded education as the most effective means of overcoming ignorance, poverty, and the many evils that prevailed in the town at that time. Elizabeth was equally enthusiastic about improving the quality of life in the town. In her zeal, she entered Butler's Sisterhood.

Here, she met other like-minded women who were led by the Spirit, as she was, to "move out" and dedicate their lives to meaningful pursuits and objectives. Some of these zealous people either left their Anglican affiliation and joined the Roman Catholic Church or engaged in works that satisfied the yearning of the human spirit. Some founded Sisterhoods; Lydia Priscilla Sellon established a Sisterhood in 1847. One of its members, Mary Ann Hayes, left her Anglican Sisterhood to enter the Roman Catholic Church. She later became a Sister and, as Sister Catherine

of St. Francis, co-founded the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Another zealous woman, Elizabeth Lockhart, had conducted a school in Chichester with the help of her mother and a friend. Henry Edward Manning, the future Cardinal, was Archdeacon in Chichester at the time. Elizabeth Lockhart was eager to join the Sisterhood under Rev. Butler's direction at Wantage. She had witnessed the conversion to Roman Catholicism of her half-brother, now Father William Lockhart, and her stepmother, Mrs. Lockhart, now a Sister of Charity of the Precious Blood. Elizabeth, however, felt called to the work of rescuing the fallen rather than to teaching. Archdeacon Manning also favored penitentiary work. So, in February, 1850, The Wantage Penitentiary was opened and Elizabeth Lockhart installed as Superior. Elizabeth Hayes also felt attracted to penitentiary work, but she decided to continue true to her original commitment, education-training pupil teachers and preparing them for their qualifying examinations. On July 29, 1850, when the new Girls' School opened, Elizabeth Hayes was in charge. Relations between Elizabeth and Rev. Butler were quite amicable from the start. Commendatory notes appear in Butler's diary at this time, praising Elizabeth's hard work and dedication. On July 25th, the Bishop instituted Elizabeth and two teachers as Sisters of the School Sisterhood. As time went on, it became evident to everyone that Elizabeth and the teachers were overworked. In an effort to reduce the pressure, Elizabeth cancelled one class, an action which vexed the vicar. After that, relations between him and Elizabeth became strained; the Cross began to cast its dark shadow across what had hitherto been bright and happy times in the little school community. An entry in Elizabeth's diary gives us insight into Elizabeth's philosophy of life and how she dealt with reverses such as this: "I think that much that befalls us is sent to teach us to know ourselves and so we are permitted thus to learn our own weakness. This ought not to make us despond. Grace would be stronger than nature if we were faithful in seeking diligently for it."

That Elizabeth sought for and received the grace to learn God's will for her is evident from her next step. She sought advice from Elizabeth Lockhart at her Greenwich convent. There is no doubt that Elizabeth Hayes devoted time to prayer and soul-searching, as she sought guidance for the future and wisdom to avoid the mistakes of the past. Conscious of the fact that many problems stemmed from lack of experience in school administration and the sensitivity and human relationship skills required for Sisterhood leadership, she requested permission to enter the postulancy of Elizabeth Lockhart for the necessary training. The request being granted, Elizabeth Hayes came under the direction of Dr. Manning, whom Cardinal Wiseman had appointed Superior of the community. Dr. Manning had come to know the Franciscan Sisters at Inverness, Scotland, whose motherhouse was in Glasgow. Impressed by what he learned about the community, he recommended their way of life and their Rule to Elizabeth Lockhart. This led to Elizabeth's going to Glasgow not just to observe but to make a second novitiate.

There is no record of Elizabeth Hayes' reception into the Catholic Church. Because membership in the Catholic Church is a prerequisite for entry into a religious community, we may rightly assume that Elizabeth was already a Catholic when she presented herself to Elizabeth Lockhart for admission into her community. She was received into the Franciscan Community, Bayswater, on November 25, 1858, when she took the name Mary Ignatius. Shortly thereafter, she traveled to Glasgow, where she made her novitiate, on the completion of which she made her profession on November 26, 1859. To her three vows, she added a fourth—to devote herself to work on the foreign missions. By December, her great ambition to work on the missions was close to fulfillment.

As she stood on the deck of her Jamaica-bound ship, the *Atrah*, and looked back on the circuitous way she had come, her heart must have burst forth in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God, who had directed her steps from Guernsey to London, to Wantage, to Glasgow, and now to Jamaica, as she ecstatically told herself: "The greatest miracle is myself, that I should be a Catholic, a religious, a Franciscan!"