

Mercy Grows in Brooklyn: Mother Mary Vincent Haire¹

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Mother Vincent Haire

There's a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed falls, it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky. It grows in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps. It grows up out of cellar gratings. It is the only tree that grows out of cement. It grows lushly ... survives without sun, water, and seemingly without earth.²

The tree to which the author refers is the iolanthus. When I was a child one grew outside my bedroom window, and I marveled at its phenomenal yearly growth. Today I marvel even more that each spring these trees begin to grow in the most improbable places, right up through the concrete battlements erected on New York City parkways. The life force is truly amazing!

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² Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1943) 3

The life-force of Mercy in Brooklyn is similarly amazing, when you look at the concrete battlements through which the community had to grow – poverty, disease, prejudice, and a virulent plague of jealousy. At the root of our amazing foundation are two spirited women who I bring together in this presentation – a reconciliation that is itself amazing as you will discover on this excursion into the past.

Before we begin, let me give you my reasons for taking you on this trip. I am neither an archivist nor a historian, but as a systematic theologian I use history principally to tell me about the present and to set my course to the future. Rather than a purely historical account, therefore, what will unfold here is more of a reflection on history, laced with a bit of conjecture and wonderment here and there that might help us to see God’s mercy growing in Brooklyn.

The official foundress of the Brooklyn Regional Community is Ellen Haire, the daughter of Edmund and Catherine Haire who was born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland in 1821. She entered the Sisters of Mercy Convent, Baggot Street on Mercy Day 1844. She received the holy habit and her name, Sister Mary Vincent on April 19, 1845. As a novice, she volunteered for the Dublin community’s foundation to New York, and so was one of the party of eight who set out from Ireland on April 15, 1846. They arrived in New York on May 14, 1846 living first with the Sisters of Charity on East Broadway until their first convent was ready for occupancy on West Washington Place. This became

known as St. Catherine's Convent, where Sister Mary Vincent lived until she left to found the Sisters of Mercy in Brooklyn.



Engraving of Old St. Patrick's Cathedral

Sister Mary Vincent Haire was the first Sister of Mercy to be professed in New York. Her profession on April 27, 1847 was held at the "old" St. Patrick's Cathedral on the corner of Mulberry and Mott Streets, where she received the black veil from the bishop. Although the community then numbered only ten, including two postulants, since it was the first ceremony of its kind ever witnessed in New York, the cathedral was packed with eager onlookers.

According to a letter she wrote back to Reverend Mother Cecilia Marmion in Ireland 3 days later, in the presence of such a large congregation she dreaded her profession, but "thanks to the prayers of many" was quite calm and felt not the least tremor as she held the candle during the Mass. When the moment

came, she ascended the Altar steps and read her Act of Profession without faltering.

“The motto on my ring says ‘Not my will but Thine be done’ and ‘Father into Thy hands I commend my Spirit.’ The first has been my greatest support and often my only prayer in desolation and anguish of mind.”

I find her courage to be inspiring. I remember feeling the same kind of desperation the day before my first profession, but I was surrounded by family and friends who, if not entirely supportive of my decision, surely continued to embrace me with their love. Sister Mary Vincent had left home and family behind in Ireland, knowing surely that she would not be returning. God’s grace and providence embraced her because she opened herself to receive it.

Brooklyn’s first bishop, Most Reverend John Loughlin, was consecrated in November 1853. He had previously served as Vicar General of the Archdiocese of New York where he had come to know the Sisters of Mercy. On August 24, 1855 he appealed to the New York community for sisters to work in his newly formed Diocese of Brooklyn.³ The matter was “duly considered,” terms were proposed on both sides, and they came to agreement on August 28, 1855 – four days later. Given some of our contemporary discernment processes, their courage and sense of adventure are truly astounding. on September 12, 1855,

³ According to *Our First 100 Years: The Reminiscences of Sister Mary Cecilia Fitzgerald*, “So profoundly impressed by the dignity and religious of Sister Mary Vincent was Dr. Loughlin, that when he asked the Sisters to cross the river and found a Convent of Mercy in Brooklyn, he requested that Sister Mary Vincent be sent as Superior.”

only two weeks after the initial request, if you are keeping track of the days, Sister Mary Vincent Haire, at age 34 and after only 11 years in the community, was appointed superior of the new community.

She was accompanied by Sisters Mary Bernard Clarke and Mary Joseph Shine. Sister Mary deSales Walsh, Zita Mullin and two other professed lay Sisters were “loaned” from New York. Sister Mary deSales remained the longest time and returned to New York on March 18, 1857, one month after Sister Agnes Carroll, a novice from St. Catherine’s, transferred to Brooklyn from the New York community. They were also accompanied by a postulant, Julia McKenna, whose name is often curiously omitted from the lists.⁴

According to the annals of the New York community, Mother Vincent had a gentle, loving nature and was keenly alive to the sorrows of others. She occasionally returned to St. Catherine’s for retreats, but her most memorable visit was at the time of the death and burial in December 1859 of her beloved friend and superior, Mother Mary Agnes O’Connor. Together the members of the original group that left Ireland in 1846 comforted and consoled one another.

The first convent on Jay Street in Brooklyn was an extension to the Bishops’s house – “crowded and inadequate” as the annals note, but “not a chair nor a washstand for the Superior. Yet, in spite of these temporal difficulties, the

⁴ Records show a discrepancy. Some list her as joining the Sisters in October of 1855 which would not put her on the list of “founders.”

convent soon became headquarters for alleviating the spiritual and bodily miseries of the poor and unfortunate.



St. James Convent, Jay Street, Brooklyn

Scarcely had the Sisters arrived at Jay Street than the poor flocked to their doors in great numbers and begged for bread.... The Reverend Mother with her staff of assistants presided at the counter which extended across the entrance of the so-called parlor.... All food items were placed in bags with the Sisters fashioned during their recreation periods....

The Sisters also formed sewing circles among the women of St. James Parish. Home visitation of the infirm was begun, and the sufferings of the sick

were alleviated by medicines and delicacies which were administered by the Sisters. Although the Brooklyn Regional Community never sponsored a hospital, from our very beginnings visitation of the sick has always been and continues to be an integral part of the sisters daily lives. This ministry is not something we decide to do or are required to do. Rather, it seems to flow naturally from who we are as God's Mercy growing in Brooklyn.

Many prisoners in the Raymond Street Jail were also visited by the sisters, who walked great distances in all sorts of weather to bring hope to these forgotten men. Criminals were prepared for death and occasionally "death cloths" were purchased for the inmates. This ministry also continues today, not only in New York City prisons, but among the undocumented. The Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy staffed the girls' department of the first St. James Parochial School where they conducted evening classes for adults as well.



Mother Joseph Lynch

In 1859, four years after their coming to Brooklyn, the community welcomed a professed Sister who transferred from Kinsale. Alicia Lynch, daughter of Timothy and Sara Lynch, was born on December 8, 1826 in Kinsale, Ireland. She entered the Convent of Mercy, Kinsale, Ireland, on May 8, 1844 – the first applicant to the Kinsale foundation. She received the holy habit and name Sister Mary Joseph on November 28, 1844 and professed her vows on December 8, 1846. She helped in the foundation of both an elementary and an industrial school in Kinsale. Six years later she left Kinsale, joining a group of fifteen Sisters of Mercy to serve in the Crimea where they worked with Florence Nightengale.

Upon returning from the war, and with the consent of Chapter, she transferred to the community of the Sisters of Mercy in the Jay Street Convent,

Brooklyn. We do not know exactly why she emigrated. Kinsale is a charming seaport town, but given Mother Joseph's later life, one presumes that after the drama of war, Kinsale held little excitement for her. There is also some evidence that her sister had married a Frederick Swayne in Brooklyn, which might be the reason Sister Mary Joseph Lynch decided to join the Brooklyn community.

Having had considerable experience in administration of industrial and select schools and in the care of the sick, Mother Joseph made a dramatic entrance into the community on October 30, 1859. She was so highly esteemed by the Sisters that the following year she was elected as Mother Assistant to Mother Mary Vincent Haire, a post she held until 1871.

Sister Mary Lucy MacDonald concludes that:

Both Mother Mary Vincent Haire and Mother Mary Joseph Lynch were ably suited for leadership. By training and temperament they fostered the practical and spiritual good of souls, both in the works to which they gave their strength and service, and among the Sisters in community. They were two very capable, gracious and charming women but Mother Joseph seems to have been the more venturesome and to have had a more aggressive personality.⁵

⁵ Sister Mary Lucy MacDonald, RSM, *By Her Fruits ... Sister Mary Joseph Lynch – Sister of Mercy 1846-1898* (Farmington Hills, MI: Religious Sisters of Mercy, 1981) 32.

During their seven years at Jay Street, the community suffered many hardships. "Death visited the little community so frequently tradition says that 'the first branch from the motherhouse was a small colony sent to heaven, there to help the work on earth as only the saints can do.'"⁶ Between 1859 and 1869, five of the sisters are known to have died: Sisters Joseph Shine (1859), Mary Teresa Sobbe (1863), Mary Francis McKenna (1864), Mary Agnes Rooney (1865) and Mary Bernard Clarke (1869), and four other sisters died in the next two years.



Drawing from the *Brooklyn Eagle* at the Opening of the Convent of Mercy

⁶ Sister Mary Eulalia Herron, *The Sisters of Mercy in the United States 1843-1928* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 44.

Because of the overcrowded living conditions at Jay Street,⁷ the Bishop obtained land and donated a large sum of money for a new convent building. The Sisters moved to their new home on Willoughby Avenue in November of 1862 although they continued to maintain the Girls' Department of St. James until 1869 when the Sisters of St. Joseph took over the work. The new convent was dedicated on December 3, 1862 and placed under the patronage of St. Francis of Assisi.

When their work at St. James ended, the Sisters began a private academy in the Convent of Mercy. Known as the "Select School," its mission was to educate the daughters of wealthy local Catholic families. They were successfully engaged in this work when a new pastor was named to the local parish. He wanted St. Patrick's to have a free parochial school, and since the community was so small it could not manage both, the "Select School" was discontinued. Until the parish school was built in 1891, the Sisters ran the free elementary and secondary school for the parish in the convent building where the private school had been located.

⁷ The local census of 1865 records seventeen Sisters of Mercy and seventeen other females in residence, with an age range from four to fifty-one.



Students of St. Francis Industrial School

Another work of the Sisters was the introduction of the St. Francis Industrial School, organized by Mother Joseph Lynch and dedicated along with the new Convent of Mercy on December 3, 1862. Mother Vincent's heart went out to young girls who were in grave moral danger because they had neither home, nor friends, nor job training of any kind. Here girls were taught useful trades such as needlework, artificial flower making, family serving, making wreaths, banners, vestments and many other useful arts. The work of the girls was advertised and their services were in demand from both manufacturers and private families.

In the “machine room,” girls became skilled in shirt making – a most lucrative means of livelihood in those days since all men’s shirts of the best and most expensive type were custom made.⁸ Over a period of nine years, hundreds of girls were placed in respectable situations. After an existence of 45 years, the Industrial School was closed.

Although it was not Mother Vincent’s intention to establish an orphanage, circumstances dictated otherwise. The Civil War was raging, immigrant ship fevers and epidemics scourged the city in 1854, 1869 and 1866, and lamentable working conditions left many children orphaned or neglected in their wake. In their visits to the sick, the Sisters quickly became aware of the desperate need for someone to care for these orphaned and neglected children.

God’s plans for the Brooklyn sisters of Mercy seem to have been different from their own, but fortunately they listened for the voice of God in the signs of the times. The community sponsored three child-caring institutions: Mercy Home for Children, Angel Guardian Home, and St. Mary of the Angels Children and Family Services. The latter two are now incorporated as MercyFirst, with a staff of over 500 and serving more than 4,000 children and families on Long Island, NY.

Close to the Convent of Mercy were lots which were below street level and were occupied by numerous squatters. Since it was not possible for the Sisters to go to the homes of all the poor who requested assistance, a certain area

⁸ *Our First 100 Years*, 4.

on the street floor of the Convent of Mercy was set aside to be of service to those who came to the sisters for alms. The "Poor Hall," as it was called, was not a place where people received money, but instead the Sisters gave those who asked tickets which could be used as cash in local grocery stores. The Sisters then settled the accounts with the storekeepers who had received the tickets. Another room located near the "Poor Hall" was the Convent Classroom. Here adults came at night to receive religious instructions from the Sisters.

In 1882, the year before her death, Mother Vincent purchased property to extend the Convent of Mercy building and allow more space for the increasing number of children coming under the care of the Sisters. The "children's side," as we called it for a hundred years, was completed in 1883. To this day, the Convent of Mercy stands in the midst of an impoverished neighborhood and tries to respond to the needs of its neighbors. The wing that once housed orphans and then developmentally disabled children has now been reshaped to provide housing to homeless women.

Mother Vincent's health was not good, and she was often reported to be away from the community, recovering with family or friends. Mother Joseph, in her role as Mother Assistant, assumed responsibility for the daily affairs of the community. In time some friction must have erupted between herself and others in the community. Although the annals do not speak of this directly, it was probably that her methods of dealing with tradesmen were very different from the way the other Sisters would handle things. Mother Joseph's correspondence

gives us a glimpse into both her assertiveness and the virulence that this misunderstanding, or at worst jealousy, occasioned.

From 1871 to 1872, Mother Joseph was reported to have been staying at the Convent of Mercy in Worcester, Massachusetts, perhaps for health reasons, although no record of this is found in their archives. Letters in the Brooklyn archives addressed to Bishop Loughlin indicated that Mother Joseph kept him apprised of her decision to “brave the storm of calumny and weather it ... with the assistance of God’s grace.”

I will outlive the calumny. If God does not see fit to justify me at this side of the grave, I trust I will have the reward of silent suffering at the other. I can thank him now more than ever for the upright honest generous heart He has given me which I hope will never be sullied by underhand chicanery or lying. I have been in bed since I saw you. I have had a violent attack of my nerves (the third since I came home) ...⁹

Correspondence in the archives in Rochester, New York, indicates that Mother Joseph Lynch was loaned to them in order to assist in establishing an Industrial School at the Convent of Mercy there. Although at first she was inclined to remain in Brooklyn to “face her accusers,” she made the decision to

⁹ Undated letter from Mother Joseph Lynch to R. Rev. John Loughlin, D.D., c. May 1872. Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy Archives.

go to Rochester for one year, at the end of which she stipulated that she would return to Brooklyn.

All seems like an unpleasant dream and I feel perfectly happy at my last decision. I forgive freely from my heart as I hope to be myself forgiven by my Maker – all that has been said against me. Time may unravel the secret machinations of my enemies. Perhaps there's no intention in the world to injure me on anyone's part. God is the only searcher of hearts. His will be done in me.¹⁰

After successfully completing her work in Rochester in April of 1873, she applied to return to the Brooklyn Community, but her request was denied although the reasons are not recorded. Again, correspondence is helpful. Sister Mary Teresa McManus, who later served as Mother Assistant to Mother Vincent Haire, wrote to the Bishop on February 26, 1873.

Rev. Mother entreats you to fulfill your promise at once and write Sr. M. J. that she cannot return. She says she depends on you to keep her away, not to send her after she returns for that will be [sic] much more difficult piece of business for you.

¹⁰ Undated letter to Rt. Rev. John Loughlin, D.D., c. 1872.

Although Sister Mary Teresa McManus was probably serving as secretary to Mother Mary Vincent at this time, it is curious to me that she wrote in her own name and not in the Superior's. I also find the use of initials rather than names surprising. Perhaps I've been watching too much Jessica Fletcher but I sense intrigue.

The Bishop did write to "Mother M. Joseph Lynch" on March 8, 1873. It was a terse note:

This is to inform you that as the Community are unwilling that you should return to their Convent, you will not be admitted into it. I could not consent to it. I am satisfied that neither they nor you could be happy if you were there.¹¹

The Bishop's letter, however, did not deter her determination to return to Brooklyn unless she received "in writing a statement of what the Community" had against her. "It is not the Community," she wrote in her immediate reply to him, "it is the prejudice of two or three."¹² She goes on to elaborate and chronicle at length what seems 120 years later to be jealousy gone wild.

¹¹ All of the correspondence with Bishop Loughlin comes from the archives of the Diocese of Brooklyn. In this case the letter exists in two drafts, indicating that he eliminated a somewhat sarcastic final sentence.

¹² Letter from Mother Joseph Lynch to Bishop John Loughlin, dated March 10, 1873.

If I get in writing a list of all the faults the Srs. have against me before I leave Rochester, and for what cause I am refused to be admitted where I did not give up my claim, only came in obedience to you for one year, I can then steer my course, but to enter a Community and sail under false colors, that I will never do. I am too honorable to do a mean or underhand [sic] act.¹³

A postscript notes, "Rev. Mother is ill nine weeks. Well, I was not the one now that troubled her. I blame her not, no I blame her advisors. May God forgive them as I do."¹⁴

On April 22, 1873, the Sisters "assembled to ascertain willingness or unwillingness ... to have Sister Mary Joseph Lynch return to their community. The Brooklyn archives record that her request was rejected by a unanimous vote. A month or so later, Mother Joseph Lynch did receive a letter directly from Mother Vincent Haire and started immediately for Brooklyn. Although that letter is not extant in the archives of the Brooklyn Regional Community, Mother Joseph Lynch quotes from the letter in a letter she later wrote to the Bishop. Mother Vincent Haire's letter said:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Your conduct in the past has been so disedifying and has caused so much suffering to many of the Sisters, as well as to myself, that we all prefer that you remain where you are.

Mother Joseph returned to Brooklyn in order to face the charges against her. Once home she saw for herself that remaining in Brooklyn would not be possible.

On September 23, 1873, she independently made a foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in Grand Rapids, and in 1878 in Big Rapids, Michigan. Later she opened schools and hospitals in Michigan, Minnesota and in Portland, Oregon. She also operated an Indian Mission School in Morris, Minnesota. She celebrated her Golden Jubilee on December 8, 1898. Difficulties in relationships, particularly with Bishops, and financial problems plagued her all across the country, but in the end she found peace.

The May 20 1898 issue of the *Morning Oregonian* reported the news of her death:

Mother Mary Joseph ... passed quietly away.... Her end was one of great peace. The prayers for the departing soul had been said half an hour previously: her hand held the half burnt-out candle, now relighted, which had been blessed nearly 54 years before, when she received the habit of the Sisterhood of Mercy: the Crucifix sent her by Pope Pius IX, during her

work as nurse in the Crimean war, was also with her during these last prayers. So calm was her passing away that those watching over her could hardly say at what moment it occurred.

Mother Vincent Haire died suddenly on March 29, 1883.¹⁵ At the time of her death there were 33 Sisters in the Congregation: 12 Lay Professed, 17 Choir Professed, three Novices and one Postulant. Mother Joseph Lynch was with the Brooklyn Community for thirteen years. The good she did while she was among us, however, endures today, and not just in Brooklyn, but clear across the country. We take great pride in telling the tales of our illustrious Industrial School, but it was the synergy of these two great women who initiated all the works in which we are engaged today.

They probably never managed to effect a reconciliation in life. We had a “Welcome Home” party for Mother Joseph Lynch shortly after the publication of Sister Mary Lucy McDonald’s biography of her, and told their story, but at the time I didn’t see how important they were for each other and for our Institute of Mercy. They show us at our best and at our worst – saints and sinners all. If you have ever been walled-out by another’s jealousy, you know of its virulence. We cannot authentically be God’s Mercy unless we have first received God’s mercy, poured out and overflowing. And we cannot receive God’s mercy unless we

¹⁵ The cause of death was listed as “valvular lesions and dilation of the heart – dropsy.”

stand in need of it. Sister Virginia Farnan¹⁶ was always quick to remind us that “to be a Sister of Mercy is to declare yourself a public sinner.” To adapt the words of Jesus,

Therefore, I tell you, their sins, which were many, have been forgiven:
hence they have shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven,
loves little.” (Luke 7:47)

¹⁶ Superior General of the Brooklyn Community of the Sisters of Mercy from 1976-1984.