

# MOTHER MARY POTTER

Foundress of 'The Little Company of Mary'

By Rev. Marius McAuliffe, O.F.M.

This is the story of a remarkable woman of our age— Mother Mary Potter, the Foundress of the Little Company of Mary, familiarly called the “Blue Nuns” because of their distinctive veils of Our Lady’s blue. She died in Rome in the odour of sanctity in 1913. Her cause of canonisation is just now being investigated.

Now that devotion to Our Lady seems to be undergoing a renewal, particularly through the teaching of Blessed Grignon de Montfort, the life of Mary Potter is most opportune. She lived de Montfort’s teaching on the Holy Slavery of Mary.

It should be of particular interest to that vast modern army of apostles, founded on de Montfort’s spiritual teaching—the Legion of Mary.

GODFREY KING was a happy man. Little twenty-year old Mary Potter had said “yes.” It is true that at times he thought her a little too happy and too worldly, but perhaps, he himself, was just a little too serious now and then.

He had tried his vocation to the austere life, and perpetual silence, of a Trappist monk, and now had accepted the guidance of God’s Providence to a life in the world. Actually, he was a mathematical coach for the Indian and Army examinations. He hoped in time that the example of his own life, supplemented by some good reading, would make Mary just a little more serious and devout. Alas for his earthly happiness. In this ideal he succeeded only too well.

It all happened like this.

One of the books he gave her was that now famous treatise of Blessed Grignon de Montfort on “True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.” It had then been translated into English by Father Faber. The theme of the book is “the Holy Slavery of Mary.”

Writing of the book, Father Faber had this to say—“I cannot think of a higher work or a broader vocation for anyone than the simple spreading of this devotion. Let a man but try it for himself and his surprise at the graces it brings with it and the transformation it causes in his soul will soon convince him of its almost incredible efficacy.” Years later, a great and holy Pope, Pius X., was able to proclaim that he would give the apostolic blessing to anyone who would even read the book. Now, in our Own time, we have the established fact that the late Holy Father, Pope Pius XI., had from his childhood practised True Devotion to Mary as outlined by Blessed Grignon de Montfort. When the late Cardinal Mercier, a short time before his death, presented to the Holy Father a copy of De Montfort’s treatise, he asked: “Does your Holiness know this book? “Yes,” replied the Holy Father, “this is a devotion which I have known and practised from my childhood.” (“Queen and Mother,” July-August, 1940.)

## A SLAVE OF MARY.

It is impossible to give any account of the life of Mary Potter without some explanation of what is meant by the devotion known as “The Slavery of Mary.” On it her life and work are hinged. It is the spiritual legacy she bequeathed to her Order. They were to become slaves of Mary.

Not, indeed, that this Slavery of Mary is confined to the members of any religious Order. Every day experience proves that it is a secret of grace to souls of all ranks and conditions in the world. Here we can touch on the matter only briefly. The interested reader will be well repaid by making a profound study of it in Blessed Grignon de Montfort’s celebrated “Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin.”

Blessed Grignon begins his treatise by laying down the unique position held by Mary in the scheme of redemption and in the distribution of graces. In all this he simply follows the traditional teaching of the Church. “To Jesus through Mary” was a principle of the golden age of the Church. De Montfort’s thesis is this—to find Jesus perfectly we must find Mary perfectly. To find Mary perfectly we must become her slaves. He admits that there are several true ways of honouring Mary.

“The first devotion,” he says, “consists in performing our duties as Christians, avoiding mortal sin, acting more from love than fear, praying to the Blessed Virgin from time to time and honouring her as the Mother of God, without having any special devotion to her.

“The second consists in having for the Blessed Virgin a more complete feeling of reverence, love, trust and veneration. It causes us to join confraternities of the Holy Rosary, of the scapular, to say part or the whole of the Holy Rosary, to honour the statues and altars of Mary, to publish her praise, to join her communities.”

All these devotions, he tells us, if we abstain from sin are good, holy and praiseworthy. However, they are not so capable of withdrawing the soul from creatures and detaching them from themselves in order to unite them with Jesus Christ.

Finally, the true and perfect devotion to Mary, he declares, is known to and practised by very few. What, then, is this wonderful devotion, this “Secret of Mary,” as he calls it?

It consists in abandoning oneself utterly and in the capacity of a slave to Mary and through her to Jesus, so that everything we do, we do through Mary, with Mary, in Mary, and for Mary.

It is, therefore, something more than just a consecration of oneself to Mary—more, even, than an offering to her of all one’s thoughts, words or actions. It is a giving over of the freedom of one’s mind and heart, of the liberty to use one’s talents, spiritual and material, to the dominion of Mary.

The implications of this are far more than appear on the surface. Indeed, the full meaning and beauty of all its details will only gradually dawn upon the soul. Its noonday splendour is reserved for the faithful soul that has persevered over the years in its practice.

Some not too deeply instructed souls are apt to take exception to the use of the word “slave” rather than “child” of Mary. De Montfort describes three kinds of slavery— The first, the slavery of nature—all men, good and bad, are the slaves of God in this sense.

The second, the slavery of constraint—in this way the devils and the rejected are slaves of God.

The third, is the slavery of love and will—and it is by this slavery, as being the most perfect, in which a creature can give himself to his Creator, that we should consecrate ourselves to God through Mary.

For the rest—for the actual practice of this surrender of one’s life to Mary—it is essential to read, and re-read, Blessed Grignon de Montfort’s own treatise.

### **LOVE’S LABOUR LOST.**

And so Mary Potter avidly read the books recommended by her fiancé. In particular, Blessed Grignon de Montfort’s work on the “Slavery of Mary” made a lasting impression. In fact, it was the very simple instrument chosen by Providence to change the whole course of her life.

Mary was never a character to do things by halves. She gave herself, and all she had, to Our Blessed Lady, to live as her slave. Before long, she began to realise that this self-surrender was to mean the giving up of earthly love for Godfrey King. On the advice of her director the engagement was broken off while she awaited in peace for Heaven’s guidance as to her future.

### **EARLY YEARS.**

She was born in London on November 22, 1847—the youngest of five children.

Her father, William Potter, was a nominal member of the Church of England, but had practised no religion. Owing to a dispute over a will he deserted the family while Mary was still too young to remember him, and settled in Australia. They did not hear from him again.

Her mother, Mary Anne Martin, was Irish and a convert to the Faith.

There is nothing worth recording of these years except the fact that “she had a natural manner, a very affectionate nature and appeared always carefree and full of fun.” From childhood her instinct was to give, and this became a marked characteristic throughout her life.

If she had any one aversion, it was to the very thought of being a nun! Nor must we suppose that a lively, affectionate nature like hers took easily to the idea of breaking off her engagement and her love for Godfrey King. We have her own simple words to assure us that the break with the man whom she loved came only at the end of a tremendous and heart-breaking struggle.

We get an intimate glimpse of her soul from these words she wrote for her confessor about this time: “I did not fully value the state of virginity. I did not know the difference between one state and another, though I knew both were good. I likewise felt the thought pressing upon me that it was God’s will that I should be a nun, though I still did not wish it. In fact, upon telling my thoughts to my mother, and when she told me she had solemnly, years ago, offered me

to Our Lady as a nun, I felt I wished she had not....Finally, after a severe struggle, I gave up all earthly love, and, in doing so, gave up my very nature; so much so that when I went to the convent they wondered that things came so easily to me, that nothing seemed difficult (except speaking about myself); but the fact was that I had already made the great sacrifice before entering, by giving up my engagement.”

This period of her life is thus summed up by her biographer: “From this moment she began to lead a life of prayer and self-sacrifice, still outwardly the same happy, irresponsible person as before, but acting as one blind; she groped helplessly for some indication of what God required of her. She exasperated her friends, and particularly her family, by trying to accomplish whatever mad scheme she thought might be God’s plan.”

### **“PER CRUCEM AD LUCEM.”**

“God writes straight on crooked lines.” In the world of souls some are led straight to their goal, others only by devious paths and over seemingly endless obstacles. He alone rules the heart, searches the whole being, and therefore knows with absolute certainty the needs of each individual soul. He alone can guide the faltering footsteps through the darkness of the night. It is a blessed day for any soul to have learned this lesson.

Mary was one of these souls.

In the next phase of her life, disappointment simply followed disappointment. On the advice of her confessor, Dr. Grant, Bishop of Southwark, Mary sought admission to the Sisters of Mercy at Brighton. There she was received as postulant on December 8, 1868. On July 30, 1869, she became a novice as Sister Mary Angela. The attempt was a failure. Even good-will, generosity, determination, were not able to ensure success. She left the convent on June 23, 1870. Many years later she wrote the following account of her departure: “The Reverend Mother was very kind to me, and when I left she expressed her hope that when my health improved I might be able to enter the Order which Father Lambert had chosen for me. The Chapter did not vote against my profession, but I was advised to leave, so as to make it easier for me, when my health was restored, to obtain admission into another Order. The Mistress of Novices told me that she thought I would be more suited to an enclosed Order, and that it would be better for me to be where I could go to Holy Communion more frequently. She had tried to obtain permission for me to communicate oftener than the others. I remember my answer, that I did not want to go to a contemplative Order because I might have to aim at high states of prayer, and I did not want to. I have such a dislike for anything out of the ordinary, but if ever I have a great dislike to any particular thing, it seems to me that it is that which God permits to happen.”

To add to her disappointment, there was the added grief of the loss of her spiritual director, Bishop Grant. He had died in Rome a short time previously.

‘One cannot resist the desire here to comment on the inscrutable ways of Divine Providence. Here is an eager, longing, loving soul prepared for any sacrifice. She had already given up, as she assures us, her very nature when she gave up her earthly love for Godfrey King. Her only wish is to serve Him to the utmost of her capacity, and she meets—what? Failure and disappointment. It is easy to write or read these lines, but it is harder to visualise or realise the darkness of mind or anguish of spirit that must have done their hard but purifying, work in her unwavering soul. Cardinal Newman wrote that “it is the rule of God’s Providence that all should succeed by failure.” At that rate, Mary was preparing to be a tremendous success, but all that was hidden in the womb of the future.

### **THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL**

That prince of mystic theologians—the Carmelite, St John of the Cross—calls that more or less prolonged period of purifying trials which souls are called upon to endure by the name of the Dark Night of the Soul. In these well-known lines of his spiritual poem he sings:

“In a dark night, with anxious love inflamed, O happy lot,  
Forth unobserved I went,  
My house being now at rest.”

He tells us that this darkness guides “more surely than the noonday sun”; and the consummation *is*, he assures us, Love providing Union with the Infinite God:

“O guiding night  
O night more lovely than the dawn,  
O night that hast united  
The Lover with His Beloved  
And changed her into her Love.”

He uses a very simple example to express what happens before the chosen soul is fit to burn within the sanctuary of its heart the pure flame of Divine Love. He compares the action of the Holy Spirit to the action of fire on wood. The first effect of fire is not to set the wood alight. Rather, it begins by blackening and disfiguring the wood, from which it then purges out the moist sap. Only gradually does it penetrate to the very centre. Finally, the wood is completely purged of all contrary elements. Then it bursts into flame and is transformed into fire.

Such is the action of the Holy Spirit. He begins by the often long-drawn-out purification of the senses, by acts of self-discipline, or, by providential happenings that detach from all that could hinder His full, untrammelled control. Later on, will come the still more terrible “Night of the Spirit”—when the soul is tested in its inmost being, when faith seems dead, hope seems vanished, and love seems cold. St John of the Cross speaks of this night as terrible in the extreme, and adds that but few souls are chosen to endure it in all its dread reality. But the end and aim of all these is to make that soul a “living flame” of Love Divine. Just as no words can describe the agony of these blessed souls so, nothing can describe the wonders of grace which God places therein after the night *of* trial is over. It is all very fine to say the saints were human, and many of them exteriorly like anybody else. We must never forget that, interiorly, they were crucified with Christ. To use the strong expression of St. Paul, they can say with him: “With Christ I am nailed to the Cross, and I live now not I, but Christ liveth in me.”

All this was expressed by Francis Thompson in the well-known lines of his “Hound of Heaven”:

“Ah! must—  
Designer Infinite—  
Ah! must Thou char the wood, ere Thou canst limn with it?”

Later on, he, too, sees it is but the loving hand of a God of infinite love and tender care when he cries out:

“Is my gloom, after all,  
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?”

It is necessary to keep these long-established principles of mystic theology well in mind when studying the life of any saint, or other chosen soul, else, we shall miss the real story of their lives, and see only the externals thereof. It may be no harm to add that, while hagiographers of our day have certainly done well in giving greater prominence to the human element in the lives of saints, stressing their every human weakness, as well as the strong traits of character that surely contributed to their success, at the same time there is the danger of running to the other extreme, forgetting that, after all, the Holy Spirit is ever the principal agent in the work of sanctification. He alone has the first and last word. The soul’s work is that of faithful co-operation.

### SEVEN YEARS’ PREPARATION.

So Mary Potter entered on a period of great trial. It lasted seven years, from the time she left the convent in 1870 till the founding of the Little Company of Mary in 1877. Not, indeed, that her ways were along rose-strewn avenues after that. Far from it. But the battle of her own soul was definitely fought, and won, in those fateful years. Later, the trials were more centred round the struggle for her Institute.

In spite of the fact that the ideal “mens sana in corpore sano”—a sound mind in a healthy body—has been accepted by the Church, and that we have the obligation to preserve our health, it is really remarkable what an important part illness, prolonged illness, too—has played in the lives of so many of God’s servants. The great St. Bernard spoke of it as a predisposition for contemplation. St. Teresa of Avila, in her “Interior Castle,” speaks of a

prolonged and obscure illness that baffles physicians, and seems to accompany a certain stage of spiritual purification. Perhaps it is near the truth to say that nothing can be so conducive to humility, to the realisation of one's utter weakness, and dependence on God's help, as a prolonged illness. Given faith, it is then easier to see the nothingness of all things earthly that do not lead to God, the shortness of life, the nearness and greatness of eternity. Pain, too, sharpens the sensitiveness of the mind, gives a deeper appreciation of God's gifts, helps to make us less critical of others, and from our own experience teaches us to have compassion for those in any way afflicted. It has been said that

“Never soul could know its powers  
Till sorrow swept its chords.”

In the case of eager, enthusiastic souls, it preserves them from that insidious danger to holiness, that of being carried away by too much external activity, which ends by sapping the very foundation of the spiritual life.

Someone has spoken of this over-eager, ill-balanced activity as “the twentieth century heresy of good works.” It is surprising how many would-be apostolic workers are every day deceived by its speciousness. Such souls want to share the public life of Christ without first having learned to go down to His hidden life at Nazareth. They are mere channels of grace, not giving themselves the opportunity of benefiting by it. They foolishly hope to sanctify others without having sanctified themselves. They have not learned the secret of waiting on God. Their works, built on the shifting sands of human endeavour, are not blessed by God, and so, are doomed to failure, no matter how brilliant the natural talent or the organisation that has been its unstable support

God now took Mary Potter's surrendered soul into His safe keeping. Two long years of painful illness followed her return from the convent. During those two years she was a complete invalid, confined to her room. However, kind Providence has placed an oasis in the desert for the parched and weary traveller. Mary found a spiritual oasis in her little room. This was a tiny oratory erected in a corner thereof, with its altar to Our Blessed Lady. It was a well-spring of grace to a sorely tried soul. There, many and many an hour of light and shade, of deep, abiding, peaceful joy and bitterest, darkest gloom passed over her soul as she fought her way against the world, the flesh, and the powers of darkness into the Maternal Heart itself of the Immaculate Mother.

Here is one paragraph from her biography that tells its own story of these days— “Her prayers brought her no consolation. In her heart she found no responding chord and no one realised the spiritual darkness had misery which was now her portion.

There were many lonely hours of enforced inaction and solitude in which her physical and spiritual sufferings were intense. Even God seemed to have deserted her, and only sufferers can realise the agony of being left alone by God—it is desolation. From her Creator she begged only to know His will; to her Saviour she offered her aching body to suffer with Him on Calvary; to the Holy Ghost she cried in anguish for light and strength.”

To my mind, this picture of misery as recorded by her biographer is somewhat overdrawn. Exponents of Mystic Theology assure us that the spiritual night is never so dark that God does not leave some star to send a ray of hope in the all-pervading darkness. There usually come peaceful, joy-giving, soul-expanding movements of grace when God renews His love and the poor, anguished soul is refreshed, invigorated and renewed to continue the struggle.

### **THE PATH OF MARY.**

It was during these two years of prayer and suffering, and very probably during those rare periods of light and peace, that Mary Potter wrote her first book, “The Path of Mary.” Several others followed at intervals.

This little treatise on devotion to Our Blessed Lady is fast becoming known as a spiritual classic. It has gone through numberless editions. Just now a new Australian edition has been published by the Little Company of Mary of Lewisham Hospital, Sydney. To read it is to see into the very soul of Mary Potter. Like all worthwhile reading, it bears the genuine stomp of simplicity of expression and profundity of thought, brought to white heat by the glowing fire of conviction. It is one of the best commentaries written on Blessed Grignon de Montfort's “Treatise on the True Devotion to Our Lady.” It is steeped in the theology of Mary. Every snare and pitfall in the practice of this devotion is portrayed with masterly skill. But it is even more than a useful commentary. It has the inspirational touch that only a

soul of prayer can possess. It was literally written at the foot of the Cross in those years of trial when she compassionated with the Maternal Heart of the Mother of Sorrows. Moreover, in it one can discern the outlines of that special vocation for which she was then being moulded and prepared. This vocation was the future Little Company of Mary; an institute of nursing Sisters, whose spiritual life would be based on the teaching of Blessed Grignon de Montfort, with an especial devotion to the Maternal Heart of Mary compassionating with the Divine Son on Calvary. This logically led to a special zeal for souls in their last agony

These three—complete surrender to Mary, special love for the Maternal Heart of Mary on Calvary, and prayer for those in their agony—are the characteristics of the Little Company of Mary, in whatever part of the world they are established, to this day.

At the bedside of the sick or dying, theirs is the merciful work to impart the same maternal love which Mary offered to her dying Son at the foot of the Cross.

### **LIGHT AND SHADE.**

The Little Flower of Jesus assures us that “God does not usually give us light for the distant future, but only for the immediate present.” There is no “grand splash” in the things that are of God. The grass in the fields, or the growing trees, and fragrant flowers, do their wonderful work of nourishing and beautifying the world without noise or bustle, but with the unerring touch of God’s Almighty Hand. So in the spiritual life. There is the sowing of a seed—a tiny seed, perhaps—in a ploughed and furrowed soul. There are the gentle rains of grace. There are, of course, the incidental storms of temptation. An enemy will try to sow cockle therein, but to the patient, faithful soul the harvest is assured. There will come, there must come, a summer and a fruitful autumn, whose mellow light will usher *in* maturity and peace.

After these two years of confinement to her room, Mary was able to move about a little. The seed was breaking ground. However, she had not finished with her spiritual growing pains. Fortunately, we have on record her own words, written under obedience to her confessor, to give us an inner glimpse of these next years. She writes:

“During this time of sorrow I had only occasional bodily suffering. At times I think it would be a relief if my body was in pain; it might have distracted me from the fearful anguish of soul, which, nevertheless, I bore without showing, and did my few duties, which consisted mostly in going out for walks with my mother and brothers, listening to them, playing and singing for them, mending their things, and so on. So I had hours to myself in the day. I used to come down from my room as though nothing was going on within me. I sought comfort from no one, confided in no one. I have never thought that in trouble anyone could comfort me but God.”

One other interior trial is worth mentioning, just to show how many of our own ordinary everyday trials are already known in the lives of God’s loved ones. This was more in the nature of a scruple. Her confessor had forbidden her to take notice of what seemed to be inspirations of grace. She tried hard to obey, but the thoughts were so much part of herself that she found it impossible. “I would leave off praying,” she writes, “when I could not help these thoughts; they were part of myself. I was under an influence stronger than myself. Jesus and I. That blissful union that I had had I was now afraid to give way to.”

To add to her mental distress came the awful thought that since she was unable to obey her confessor she must be possessed by the devil.

She continues: “God permitted me to have this fear of being displeasing to Him whom I loved more than myself. Then would come the thought if I was in such a dangerous state, surely I should be lost, but I knew it was a sin to think that, and had to put it away. . . . I have passed a priest in the confessional box close to the Communion rails, and have gone to Communion, for it seemed to me more pleasing to God to do so, than to ease my fears, give way to scruples; in other words, give way to the Evil One’s suggestions.” To anyone instructed in the ways of the Holy Spirit, her soul at this period is an open book. He was simply bringing her through a special interior purification of mind and heart, of intellect and will, before giving her a corresponding depth of humility and purity of Divine Love. To the sorely tried soul such purification seems like reprobation itself. Happy souls—yours is the real way of the Spirit of God “through the Cross to Light.” Thank God such souls are ever in the Church. They are the real workers in the Lord’s vineyard. They are the Marys pouring out the alabaster vases of their lives at the feet of God. The Pharisees, as

St. Teresa remarks, still criticise, and the faithless say, why do they not give their lives to action? Truly St. Paul could say, “the animal man perceiveth not these things that are of the spirit of God.” The day of judgment will reveal their beauty of soul and their fruitfulness in the Church.

### **HER WORK FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION.**

About the year 1873 the Bishops were repeatedly appealing for volunteers to provide some sort of Christian education for the neglected children of their forlorn flocks. Mary’s health was so far improved that she opened a private school in Portsmouth. However, teaching had no attraction for her. Then along came Godfrey King to renew his offer of marriage. This she resolutely declined.

To make matters worse her family could not understand her. After all, they were no better judges than others to whom such souls, because they cannot live like everybody else, are lightly dismissed as hypochondriacs.

All the while the vision of her vocation was becoming clearer—it was not in being a teacher, but in the much needed work of mercy, of providing an Institute of Nursing.

### **THE CATHOLIC NURSE.**

Today we see around us so many well-equipped hospitals, each carrying on its tremendous and beautiful work of mercy, in tending the sick, the diseased, and the dying, that we are, perhaps, inclined to think it has ever been thus.

Far from it. Actually, at the time Mary Potter founded her nursing institute, the conditions in England were appalling.

In the days before Christ the pagans, just like their modern counterpart, had the very simple remedy of killing off the sick and the feeble. They were the unwanted members of pagan society. The Christian soul revolts at the very idea. To the pagan it was the easy way out of an insoluble problem. Then came the moral revolution of the Christian Faith. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”—and poverty was ennobled by Christ. Ever after, the Christian learned to look upon the meanest, poorest, most abandoned as members of Christ’s Mystical Body—Christ was seen and served in them.

As a result the first Christian hospitals were established during the fourth century. There was a Christian hospital in Constantinople, built by St. Zoticus. In 369 St. Basil founded a “Basiliad” or hospital in Cappadocia. It is described as a city in itself, each street being devoted to different classes of patients, with separate homes for physicians and nurses. Later on, with the spread of Christianity came the monasteries. Among the manifold activities of such was the care of the sick generally. Later, special Orders were established for this work. St. Francis himself and the Franciscans undertook the care of the lepers. That work of mercy is still carried on.

In England, at the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII. there were actually 750 institutions for the care of the poor and sick, in addition to the monasteries. One can easily realise the awful effects of the suppression of the monasteries and the outlawry of these institutions. The poor were abandoned to want and the sick to misery. Disease spread rapidly. When Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne the topical subject of the day was vagrancy. The majority of the poor had become wanderers without any settled abode, and idleness had been forced upon them. It was during this period that the hated workhouse system was introduced, whereby the poor were compelled to work under a code of Poor Laws. Nothing was done to alleviate the sufferings of the sick poor.

Even at the beginning of the last century nursing was considered to be “one of the lowest types of work which a girl could do.” The story of heroic struggle carried on by Florence Nightingale for the reform of the nursing profession is well known. The fact is not so well known, or at least not so well acknowledged, that the pioneers in that reform were the Irish Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Mercy. Florence herself trained for a while with Catholic Sisters in Paris before the Crimean War.

The following tribute to the Catholic nun is taken from a letter from Florence Nightingale to Cardinal Manning, when she, though a Protestant, asked permission to be allowed to train as a nursing sister: “For what training is there compared with that of a Catholic nun? Those ladies who are not sisters have not the chastened temper, the Christian grace, the accomplished loveliness and energy of a regular nun. I have seen something of different kinds of nun, and am no longer young, and do not speak from enthusiasm, but from experience. There is nothing like the training (in

those days) which the Sacred Heart or the Order of St. Vincent gives to women.”

Mary Potter saw the need of her day. She felt the call to establish “a community of religious nurses, scientifically trained, preferably in their own schools, whose special work and purpose would be intercession for, and nursing of, the sick and dying for the honour of the Maternal Heart of Our Blessed Lady on Calvary.”

### A BEGINNING.

“In the beginning of 1876, Mary was twenty-eight years of age. Those who remember her then describe her as charming in appearance, gracious in manner, and endowed with an irresistible sense of humour. Her personality seemed to radiate joy and serenity which surrounded her exterior life with an atmosphere of repose and tranquillity. Thus no one suspected the interior struggle—the dark night of the soul—from which she had just emerged.” Thus does her biographer describe Mary Potter at the moment when, at long last, she was able to make a beginning of her life’s work for the sick and the dying.

Meanwhile, a few friends had gathered round. Plans were drawn up. The Bishop, Dr. Danell, was approached for his approbation. This he readily and graciously gave, to enrol members, to hold meetings, visit the sick and teach in the school. He suggested prayers to be said by members of the society. With characteristic energy, Mary ‘threw herself into the work. But here, let us never forget, was a soul tried and prepared, a soul who had learned to lean on God alone, learned to keep tryst with Him hourly in the tabernacle of her heart. Such a soul would never make the tragic mistake of the unenlightened would-be apostle, of allowing even the most absorbing work to dissipate the spiritual life, the building up of which had been so costly—its further development being the only guarantee that heaven would continue to bless her endeavours.

In the official life of Mary Potter there are several very interesting letters of this period. They make delightful reading, and are of deep, spiritual content. One would love to quote from them more extensively. However, the following letter to her new-found director, Father Selley, a Marist, gives an intimate glimpse of her soul, with its hopes and fears:

33 Norfolk Street, Southsea.

Reverend and dear Father in Jesus and Mary,— In hopes of obtaining a friend for a work of God now in its infancy, I write to tell you as briefly as I can what it is. It is years since the thought occurred to me that there should be an Order devoted to the dying. I sent it away as nonsense. Again, the year before last, I believe it was shown me that it was a work which I had to do. All I could tell my director about it was that its spirit and its model would be Calvary. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, after Holy Communion, Our Lord seemed to inspire me to honour the Heart of His Mother. It was a new devotion to me, and the peace and thanksgiving that it brought me I cannot describe. God knows how I had been pouring myself out in prayer to aid the dying, and now it seemed that God willed we should set before Him the Mother-Heart of Our Lady pleading for her children, especially those in the greatest need—the dying. I began to pray in union with that Heart that had suffered so grievously on Calvary.

I must not delay to tell you how the work was, so to speak, completely put to death. I was bidden to put it all away as imagination. However, I saw the Bishop, who was very kind to me, and said that I might influence any others to join me in devotion for the dying, that we might hold meetings and visit cases that were recommended to us; he told me the prayers we might use, mentioned one that he himself said every day, and he said that we might see him again. One thing he distinctly said was that the word “Order” was not to be mentioned amongst us. He gave his blessing to the school. He first refused to allow me to have Mass, and then said that the demand must come from Father Horan. I trust and pray that Our Lord, by the love He bears the Heart of His Mother, will draw together those who are united in honouring it. Mary was present in person on Calvary. Do you not believe that this is a work that she is most anxious should be done? Will she not bless all those who join in it, and, as it were, take her place at the deathbed of her children who work, pray, and suffer for the dying?

The little group “lived in their own homes, attended Mass and prayers in common whenever possible; they devoted any free time to good works generally. The pivot of mutual attraction. however, was the nursing of the sick and dying, and all other work moved around the centre.”

### “THE DEVIL’S FIRE BRIGADE.”

It has been remarked, cynically perhaps, that the person who begins any good work, especially of a spiritual nature, need never insure it against fire, because “the devil’s fire brigade” will see to it that there will be ever at hand an unlimited supply of cold water. This water will be poured forth from every angle, by good-meaning people, who take upon themselves the duty of protecting the rest of us from the fires of an enthusiasm that their lifeless hearts can never understand. Of course, there is a loving Providence watching the work of this fire brigade. After all, the evil spirits themselves have to co-operate for the perfection of the just, to whom “all things work together unto good.” Naturally, this does not refer to that watchful prudence by which Holy Mother the Church protects herself and her children from the aberrations of misguided souls and unbalanced minds.

Mary got her share of attention from those who would protect her from herself. Even her own mother misunderstood her, and I suppose it must be admitted that, all things considered, it was hard to blame her. She, like others, could only see the surface. She could know nothing of the glowing fire within. Perhaps the hardest cross to sensitive natures is to be misunderstood by dear friends, or, worse still, to have one’s motives impugned, or one’s integrity challenged. The Divine Master Himself knew that form of spiritual crucifixion. His saints have shared it with Him.

Imagine, then, Mary Potter’s feelings when she read the following letter from the mother she loved, as only one of her ardent, sensitive nature could love. At the time, Mary had gone to London to see after the publication of her book:

July 11, 1876.

My dear Child,— I write to know when you are returning home. Your continued absence, known to be against my wishes, is giving, I fear, scandal. I wrote to your uncle as you desired, and you evidently thought I was unjust. Not so, my darling; that can never be. You wish to know why I wrote to *him*. You had given me to understand there was an uncertainty about your return, and, instead of a little time to have your book revised, it was all so indefinite; no one could but approve as natural my anxiety for you to return, you being with entire strangers. And now I learn you are intimate with the young woman whose violent temper rendered her immediate dismissal requisite here, I am still more desirous that you return. I have had a letter from my dear cousin Jane, sympathising with me in this trouble; their opinion is expressed in these words: “Mary has set up an idol she calls duty; and filial affection, common sense and reason must alike bow to it.” I must try and not think the same. M. King came to tea and we talked of a society for the dying; she agreed with me that fervent prayer should be offered for them, but she, like me, could not bear the thought that numbers should be in the room at the supreme moment. I have no doubt that we speak the mind of most; as for the poor, they endure, in many cases, what they do not like, *and* their relatives encourage it (and it is quite natural) for the sake of the little temporal comforts the good and kindhearted would bestow. But on this I do not want to enter now; come home, come and be my comfort. Remember what Canon Rymer wrote you: “If your Mama, by reason of age and infirmities, requires you, you will do well to be with her.” I am sure the highest souls would say the same.

God bless you.

Your anxious, loving mother,

MARY A. POTTER.

### THE OPPOSITION GROWS.

Even his Eminence Cardinal Manning, enlightened and zealous man though he certainly was, was not very impressed by Mary. She went to see him, told him of her plans and asked permission to seek helpers in the Archdiocese of Westminster. He listened patiently, then simply answered, “Let Miss Potter go home to her mother.” Mischievously, one loves to wonder what they said to each other later on in heaven! Did he draw a delicate attention to an extra jewel in her crown, so to speak, because a humbled soul said “Fiat” to the representative “of the Sweet Christ on earth”? So is the true apostle fashioned even till this day. The writer has vivid remembrances of the obstacles set in the path of another great movement which was *set up* to the honour of Mary and for the good of souls—that providential gift of God to the Church of our day—the Legion of Mary. He has seen the saddened expression of its founder when he was looked upon with suspicion, and misunderstood by his friends.

Meanwhile, Mary kept a calm heart and a clear mind. She obeyed the Cardinal. Her programme of these days is

outlined in one of her letters to her director:

Our plan of life will be very simple; until I, myself, have a guide to consult upon the penances and other exterior practices, I think it would be better to confine ourselves to the formation of the interior spirit, which will be the imitation of Our Lady. God has not left me in ignorance of what He expects from me, but as I cannot tell those who may join me what will follow, I shall content myself with striving, by God's help, to induce them to cultivate a devotion to Our Lady that they may never have had before, and also to desire to devote themselves to saving souls—to do Our Lady's work of assisting the dying. They will be all the better for these two practices, even if they do not remain. For the present, then, those who come to join me will simply make Meditation (half an hour), recite the Little Office of Our Lady, make the Visit to the Blessed Sacrament, recite the prayers that the Bishop told me, teach in the school, fulfil domestic duties, visit the sick whom Father Horan recommends, and not attempt anything that, while we are not a religious Order, we might not have the grace to perform. The school, however, is not part of my idea.

At this stage, people of the parish of Portsmouth began to talk of Mary as a "madcap." Her reputation was not enhanced when, impelled by charity, she so far forgot the "proprieties" as to link arms with a very drunken soldier so that he could walk "straight" past the sentry, thereby aiding him to escape punishment by allowing the sentry to believe they were a pair out for a stroll.

### **THE FIRE IS ALMOST EXTINGUISHED.**

While the poor still loved her and welcomed her visits, together with those of her companions, whole families ostracised her. Naturally, she could not but feel this keenly.

One can easily see the many, many interior submissions to God's Will, the many acts of love of God in all this, that went up hourly from the altar of Mary's heart. Undaunted, the brave little soul held on, even when, as she wrote to her director, her family told her to "get out" or change her way of living. She refused to go, pleading that her mother needed her. She was bluntly told, "She does not want you; she was in capital spirits while you were away."

All this was bad enough, but worse was to come. It came in the form of the following soul-shattering letter from the Bishop, Dr. Danell:

My dear Miss Potter,—

In the most positive and decisive manner possible I forbid you to undertake to found any religious society or order in my diocese. I am surprised that, after my clear prohibition when you called upon me some little time ago, you should have so soon disobeyed me.

You may tell your confessor, Father Selley, he may call on me next Monday morning at 12.

Blessing you,

Yours faithfully,

Looking back now, calmly, it must be admitted that the Bishop had no other course. Letters of accusation kept coming in to him, including one from Mary's own brother, Thomas.

We get a good insight of her worries from another letter, this time from a Protestant uncle—a Mr. George Saul:

14/8/1876

My dear Mary,

Of course I do not suppose I *am* infallible, but I believe I am quite right in distrusting your judgment and businesslike habits when they are directly the reverse of those of your family, to say nothing of bishops, priests, etc. I am quite sure that did the views of your mother and brothers correspond with your own, they would readily find means to assist you in your plans, and the fact of their opposition shows that you are altogether mistaken. Your apology for secrecy and reticence is very illogical, and it is much better to have a safety valve to your engine than to force it to collapse or explode, as is the case likely to occur in some of your wild-goose schemes. I have some difficulty in crediting you with "a good, loving heart" when I see the anxieties with which you trouble all those who love you, but I suppose persistency in your case is a refined species of obstinacy. Your note has only reached me here, and I hasten to reply that I will be no party in assisting you in this matter, We are enjoying the country, which is quite

new to us, but wish it was cooler.

With best wishes for your reformation,—

### “ALONE, SEEING NOUGHT.”

When St. John of the Cross, in his lonely prison cell, wrote these words, “Alone, seeing naught save that whereon my soul hath rested,” he touched the bedrock of human dereliction. He had, like Jesus in Gethsemani, drank his cup of sorrow to the very dregs.

Now came Mary’s turn to stand alone beneath the cross— her mystic Calvary. Her director, Father Selley, *was* forbidden by his Superiors to hold any communication whatsoever with her. Later, they extended this prohibition to the confessional. It is not surprising that one of God’s saints (I think it was St. Gertrude) complained lovingly to Him, “It is no wonder, dear Lord, You have so few friends when You treat them thus.”

As is natural in such a crisis, Mary was now assailed with the most terrible and subtle form of temptation. She thought that all her inspirations, lights, and plans were not from God. She thought that she had been deluded, and that she was to blame for all the storm that had arisen about her, especially for the trouble caused to Father Selley. Her letters to him were returned. To complete her crucifixion came a malignant and painful cancer.

Yet to one of her companions she is able to write:

Many thanks for your letter and the olive leaf enclosed. I value it so much, having come *from* Mount Olivet. May it be a little token that the storm has subsided, either regarding my work or myself. Do not trouble over me, my time may not have come yet; God may wish me to go through in myself what those who come after me will have to endure. Those who are to show the way must first have gone by it. Those who join this work dedicated to Calvary may be required, as it were, to “die daily,” to lead a dying life, to constantly offer their lives to show their willingness to lay them down if required. The constant acts that they would thus make might be accepted by God for the assistance of the dying. All day yesterday (Feast of the Presentation), especially, I was, to so speak, face to face with death, offering myself gladly, only with the feeling, which everyone in a right spirit must know, of how utterly unworthy *I* was and that I had done nothing. If we could not turn in trust to Our Lord, what should we do? For years back I have thought much of death, and lived expecting it, longed for it. These last few years have, perhaps, been intended by God to put into me the spirit which He wishes possessed by those who join the work of Calvary. It may be simply that God wishes me to possess and make known to others this spirit—to constantly offer their lives to God and yet not to die, like Our Lady on Calvary. We must all try and possess her spirit, that it may live in us.....

One word of warning here. We must not get the idea that Mary Potter was one of those self-conscious, mis-guided souls with a sad face and the pose of a martyr. The very opposite is the truth. Actually, she blames her lively manner, her refusal to be cast down, as giving the false impression that she was not the type to undertake the serious work of founding a religious Order. After all, we know that great sanctity is the outcome of the action of the Holy Spirit and that among the fruits of this action are peace and joy. Abiding peace and serene joy are the infallible marks of the true mystic. They are the test of true humility and unswerving love.

It will help us to preserve a proper perspective of her life if we recall the great fact that she had long since given herself, body and soul, mind and heart, to the Mother of God to be her slave—to be done with as Mary willed. Such an attitude gives stability and confidence.

Did she not write, in her “Path of Mary,” published during the very days of trial, these words that are the echo of her own soul:

“Now it should ever be remembered that hope is one of the evangelical virtues which must be cultivated as carefully as faith and love. God loves us to hope in Him. He will have mercy on us according to our trust in Him and He would have you recollect that though the essence of this devotion is that we give our service to God because it is honest and just to do so, whether we are promised reward or not, because by right He deserves it from us and because by offering our service by Mary makes it more pleasing to Him, still Mary’s own look forward to a reward; they look and long for their home in Heaven; but with the truthfulness engendered by this devotion they look forward to it and long for it as a pure mercy of God which no service of theirs could have deserved or earned. Mary’s own walk more confidently, more hopefully through this very knowledge, and their humble hope is well pleasing to God, and

according to their hope it will be done to them.

“If you would be loved with a special love by our dear Lord, imitate the patient, gentle Mother, who stood with breaking heart at the foot of the Cross, joining her tears with the blood that was there shed, with such ardent love, that souls might be saved; imitate that sweet Mother who, in the midst of suffering such as no other purely human heart has ever known, thought not of her own grief, but as a means of invoking what Jesus drew upon this world, the mercy of God, that beautiful attribute of God which, adorable as are all the divine attributes, we inhabitants of the fallen world must ever love with a peculiar love, and which it is the office of our own Mother Mary (the Mother of Mercy) to reflect.

“Let us, then, in time of suffering be unselfish, and knowing that it is the time when we can pray most efficaciously—for the prayer of the suffering heart has wondrous power with God—let us, united to the Compassionate Maternal Heart of Mary, join in offering the Precious Blood, the outpoured life of Jesus, and beg the mercy of God and that His Holy Spirit may descend upon the Church, the Spouse of Christ, now persecuted as was her Lord.”

### **AT LAST! THE LITTLE COMPANY OF MARY.**

When there was no room in the inn, Providence led Mary and Joseph to seek the cheerless shelter of Bethlehem’s humble stable. Yet what young mother in a gilded palace ever tastes the rapturous joy of that radiant Mother when she beheld the “Joy of Angels” resting on her bosom.

Just when every door seemed closed and tightly barred, when human prudence seemed to have omitted nothing to make its end prevail, just then, suddenly, unexpectedly, Mary Potter found the cave that was to cradle her infant foundation. It was to be in the then little village of Hyson Green, about two miles from Nottingham. The Bishop was Dr. Bagshawe.

It happened that a certain Mr. Young had read her “Path of Mary:” It had such an influence on his life that he at once offered her a portion of his fortune if she would organise some charitable work in Lincolnshire in honour of Our Blessed Lady. At the same time, he offered to interview Bishop Bagshawe. Strangely enough, one of Mary’s brothers, George, also interested himself, and wrote to the Bishop. Just before Father Selley had been forbidden to interest himself in Mary Potter’s work, he, too, had written to the same Bishop. Dr. Bagshawe consented, and at once Mary set out to prepare for the foundation. Before leaving home she asked her mother a consent. It was abruptly refused. Mary left home without it.

There was, of course, much to be done. All her old helpers now gathered round eager to form themselves into a regular religious society. The interested reader will find all the details of the inevitable ups and downs, of disappointments and failures, recorded in her biography.

An old disused factory was procured. It was in an almost complete state of dilapidation. The villagers regarded it at rubbish heap. To Mary it was a little bit of heaven, as was the stable at Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph.

At long last the opening ceremony was fixed for Easter Monday, April 2, 1877. Protestants as well as Catholics helped to make it ready. The Bishop sang the Mass and dedicated the convent to the Maternal Heart of Mary. Though the building was unfurnished, the Bishop left the Blessed Sacrament with them. A chaplain *was* appointed. The new society was born, though it had yet to receive its name. The period of patient waiting was rewarded.

The Bishop took a fatherly interest. A roughly drawn Rule of Life was formulated. After various suggestions as to a name—such as “Sisters of *Mater Dolorosa*,” or “Mary’s Own,” the Bishop declared that Mary’s choice of the “Little Company of Mary” should be adopted. “I think,” he remarked, “she had light on the matter and the best right to settle it.”

### **A MANNEQUIN PARADE!**

Well at least that is what it looked like. It concerned the question of an appropriate dress. This is how it is described in the biography:

“The discussion regarding the appropriate dress afforded amusement. Mary Eleanor Smith was frequently called on to play the part of ‘Mannequin.’ She dressed up and was paraded before the Bishop and Community to demonstrate each idea as it was discussed. Mary proposed a plain habit of coarse sackcloth or canvas, with a pale blue veil; some

wanted a brown habit, and others voted for a black one.

“The Bishop, who was strongly opposed to the sackcloth, approved a black tunic and scapular, a black leather cincture, a rosary of fifteen decades, a white linen headdress and a pale blue veil. Except for a few modifications, *by* which the chaplet of five decades was substituted for the large rosary, and the leather belt replaced by a red woolen cord, the habit was identical with that worn today.

“The first clothing ceremony took place on July 2. In that year, 1877, this day was a double festival—the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, and the Feast of the Visitation. Bishop Bagshawe arrived in the afternoon, preached the sermon, and gave the habit to Mary and her five companions. Mary took the name of Mary Angela; Mrs. Bryan became Mary Elizabeth—later changed to Magdalen, by which name she was known throughout her life; Mary Bray chose the name of Agnes; Mary Eleanor Smith, Cecilia; Edith Coleridge, Philip; and another postulant who, however, did not persevere, became Sister Joseph.

“Once again the chapel was crowded and outside in the streets crowds of villagers stood waiting to have a look at the new Sisters with the blue veils.”

### **MARY AND MARTHA.**

To live with Mary in spirit at the feet of Jesus, while serving Him with Martha in the persons of the sick and dying, was ever the ideal of Mary Potter for herself and her Institute.

It is the theme of all her writings. It is, of course, the summing up of all spiritual wisdom. In later years she thus expressed her thoughts in a conference for the Feast of St Martha: “As Martha and Mary were sisters, united together and loving, so may prayer and work be sisters in our lives that they may ever go hand in hand and never be disunited.”

She wanted her nuns to be as efficient as trained nurses, as they would be perfect as religious. “Be good nuns first,” she used to say, “and then you’ll be good nurses.” She had a positive horror of allowing any work, no matter how pressing, to interfere with, or swamp, their spiritual lives. Alas! we have everyday experience to prove the wisdom of such watchful care. She knew that souls in a hurry, even souls in religion, never go far in the things of God, or do much lasting good to others. It was not so much work she feared, as the way in which it was done.

The months following the foundation were a time of testing. Work of all kinds came along, teaching as well as nursing. Besides, they had not even beds to sleep on, and food was scarce. “The school-room was converted into a dormitory at night and we slept on sacks filled with straw, laid on the floor or on hard, wooden benches.”

It was, perhaps, only to be expected that the strain of all that was entailed would tell. It did. Mary became seriously ill; a malignant growth was discovered in the breast. Jestingly she asked permission to dispose of some “common property” when she wanted the Bishop’s consent to its removal. This operation had to be followed by another. A year later she contracted scarlet fever from a poor woman she was nursing.

### **FURTHER TRIALS AND DIFFICULTIES.**

The work progressed. New members were being received and professed. There were, of course, the usual difficulties of unsuitable candidates, and many disappointments.

The most serious of these difficulties was a growing divergence between Mary and Bishop Bagshawe on the question of authority, as well as in the drawing up of a Rule of Life. Actually, she found herself no longer Superior. She accepted cheerfully the Bishop’s orders. Soon she was appointed Mistress of Novices. Later, the Bishop admitted that he had simply been trying her, in every way he could think of, and that never once did she fail him. When he was satisfied that she was of the true spirit, he changed his attitude and, at a formal chapter held under his direction, she was unanimously elected Superior.

Still, all this did not settle her problem of a Rule of life. It was becoming clear to her that only by going to Rome could she ever hope to have the growing Institute placed on a sure basis. Accordingly, this became the object of special prayer, and at last Providence so decreed. The Bishop gave his consent, much to everybody’s surprise. Mother Mary, with two sisters, set out for Rome. The Bishop later admitted that he gave his consent because he thought it was the last request of a woman near to death.

## **AVE ROMA IMMORTALIS!**

His is indeed a benumbed spirit whose heart does not exult as he catches the first glimpse of Rome, with old St. Peter's in silhouette, guarding the Eternal City.

Ave Roma Immortalis! Hail Immortal Rome! Mistress of the world, Teacher of the nations, Home of the arts—but, greater, aye, far, greater than all these proud titles—Fountain of Truth—Throbbing Heart of the Christian world—Sole Guardian of the Treasury of the Faith. What a host of memories crowd the chambers of the mind at the mention of that one word—Rome! Pilgrims from the wide world have trod its storied streets and prayed within its hallowed walls; and centre of all—object of the world's veneration—is the simple white-clad figure of “The Sweetest Christ on Earth.”

One can easily imagine how the joyous spirit, the buoyant heart of Mary Potter exulted when, at last, on October 10, 1882, after a weary journey of ten days, Rome loomed in sight. We are told that Mother Mary fell on her knees and said the Magnificat—“Our Lady's Te Deum,” in thanks-offering for the vision.

## **POPE LEO XIII**

No time was lost in procuring an audience with the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII. This took place on the day following their arrival. On the next Sunday they had the still greater privilege of being present at the Holy Father's Mass, receiving Holy Communion from him and afterwards being presented to him.

This last interview changed the whole course of things. When Mary asked his Holiness to bless her work and the Constitutions, she added that, with his blessing, she would be content to go back to England. To her joy and amazement the Holy Father replied: “But why go back? Why not remain? The doors of Rome are open to you.”

Actually, we know she had been praying during the journey to know if God willed her to make a foundation in Rome. Here, with a directness that was not far short of miraculous, was the answer. The Vicar of Christ had spoken and invited her to establish a home within the walls of the Eternal City. There she was to spend the remaining years of her life.

## **ROMAN DAYS**

There was the usual round of visits, official and otherwise, that every person in Mary's position is expected to carry out. All the work of having the Constitutions approved had to be gone through. At one period she was advised to return to England, as it would take many months to have everything arranged.

Mary was not going back. The Holy Father himself had invited her to stay, and she was not the type to miss an opportunity or an inspiration to do good.

She discovered that there was much need for a convent and hospital for the English community in Rome. Some Sisters were sent from England and Mary set to work.

They had considerable difficulty in procuring a suitable house. They had been going from one convent to another. Now that there were more Sisters actually on their way, something had to be done.

Just then, Providence provided a good and lifelong friend in the person of Father Luke Carey, O.F.M. (he died only in 1924), who was then attached to the Irish Franciscan College of St. Isidore. It is thus described in the biography:

“Hearing of their predicament, Father Luke Carey, O.F.M., came to their assistance. He secured for them an apartment near the church of the Irish Franciscans, Sant' Isidoro. Here, for the first time since coming to Rome, they were able to live a regular community life. They had their own little oratory, with the Blessed Sacrament reserved. Once more Mother Mary's prophecy was fulfilled:

‘When we begin to work Our Lord will begin with us.’ They went out regularly to do private nursing; soon their work began to be appreciated, and they were brought into contact with many friends and benefactors. Father Luke Carey remained one of their staunchest supporters all his life.”

They stayed in this apartment for about two years. It was a hard struggle financially. Two Sisters went out every day to beg. Often the cupboard was bare. At the end of two years of this precarious existence, Count Plunkett, an Irishman (his son Joseph was executed after the 1916 rebellion), obtained better accommodation and secured the rent. Here they were able to establish a novitiate, as well as take a few patients. Ten years later, in 1894, a larger house was rented near Porta Pia.

## “CALVARY”

In 1907 came her masterpiece—the Calvary Hospital, near the church of San Stephano Rotondo, on the Coelian Hill. As usual, everybody opposed her. They disagreed with the site— and these included eminent Cardinals They disagreed with the plans, and these included eminent architects. They disagreed with the title chosen for her chapel, and these included a Papal Master of Ceremonies! They said the title, “Maternal Heart of Mary” was not in use, and suggested the “Immaculate Heart of Mary.” Mary held on. In the end, Pope Pius X ordered that Mary’s choice prevail, and so the chapel was consecrated on October 11, 1908—to the Maternal Heart of Mary. The architects told her the plan was impossible. Mother Mary’s plan was in the shape of a Latin cross with a heart-shaped chapel in the centre. The right arm of the cross was reserved for her community; the left arm, hospice for visitors; the head of the cross was to be for ecclesiastical patients; and the main body of the cross for the general public.

Of course, she got her way. What could eminent Cardinals, eminent architects and Papal Masters of Ceremonies do against the prayers of a soul that prays and lives in the Maternal Heart of Mary? Generations of priests scattered throughout the world, especially the English-speaking world, have lived to bless Mother Mary Potter and her Blue Veiled Nuns for the skilful nursing that brought them through the severe strain of student days in Rome. For them “Calvary” was, and is, a hospital and a home.

## AUSTRALIA!

While all this was going on, and while many other pressing problems were calling for attention, such as the final approval of the Constitutions—in 1884—came an insistent call from a far-off southern land, dedicated long before to the Holy Spirit of Love. The insistent voice was that of Cardinal Moran. The land was our own Australia. Nottingham, Rome, Lewisham—that was the order of her first trinity of houses. It took no small courage to send her nuns so far away, when, as yet, it might be reasonably feared that the spirit of her Order was not yet sufficiently developed. However, all obstacles were brushed aside and six members of the Little Company of Mary—five from England and one from Rome—accompanied the Cardinal when he returned in 1885. Though very ill, Mary made the journey to Naples to farewell and bless the pioneers. Mother Raphael was chosen as Superior. The following account of their arrival is taken from a journal kept by one of the Sisters:

“While we were going up the Harbour we heard on all sides from the boats and steam launches that had come out to meet the ‘Liguria,’ ‘Welcome to Australia. Three cheers for the good old nuns! Good luck and prosperity attend you.’

“Our kind friend, Mr. Fleming, whom Dr. O’Haran had asked to look after us, pointed out Rose Bay and the Convent of the Sacred Heart, such a beautiful place, with gardens running down to the water’s edge. The Sisters were all out in the grounds waving to us in welcome. We arrived at Circular Quay, where Mr. Fleming had a carriage and pair waiting for us. After some time, we all landed and were very pleased to find ourselves safe as land again.

“As we drove along, the people in the streets called out as we passed, ‘Welcome to Australia! Good luck to you and God bless you.’ Some of the old women went down on their knees in the street, invoking all kinds of blessings on us. People were out on balconies waving to us, and there were such crowds on all sides, until we turned into Darlinghurst, the suburb where our little cottage is.

“We were driven to the Convent of the Irish Sisters of Charity, which is quite close to our little house. We received a most hearty welcome from the dear Sisters. The Rev. Mother Rectress and Mother Francis were at the door to greet us and to welcome us to Sydney.

“We paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in thanksgiving for our safe journey and to ask our dear Lord to bless and prosper Our Lady’s Little Company in Sydney. The dear Sisters had a nice dinner prepared for us, and after we had rested we went over the grounds and they all joined us and we had recreation together.

“In the evening we were taken to our little cottage, where we were received by Mother Gertrude and Sister Bonaventure, who welcomed us. They had prepared a nice little altar of Our Lady, with a statue and four lighted candles. We all knelt down and said the ‘Memorare,’ and some ‘Hail Marys’ to ask Our Lady to bless her children.

Then the kind Sisters showed us over the house, where they had prepared everything for us, even to stocking the larder and having the kettle boiling on the kitchen fire.

We shall never forget their kindness.”

Today the word “Lewisham” in Australia stands for the perfection of the nursing Sister. Other foundations followed in due course at Ryde, Wagga and Lake Macquarie, in N.S.W.; as well as in Adelaide, Melbourne and Hobart. In New Zealand, they are established at Christchurch and Wellington.

### IN THE OLD WORLD

Few founders of religious Institutes have been privileged to live to see so many off-shoots of the parent plant as Mary Potter. Almost every year saw a new foundation. Today there are four in Ireland—at Limerick, Milford, Fermoy and Carlow; three in London, with others at Edinburgh, Hillingdon, St. Leonards-on-Sea, and Cannock. There is one at Malta, at Fiesole in Italy, one at Buenos Aires in South America, one in Port Elizabeth, South Africa; and one in Chicago. So has the tiny seed prospered. So has the Maternal Heart of Mary—the Mediatrix of all graces—rewarded trusting souls.

### EVENTIDE

It has been said that good characters, like good wine, sweeten with age. God does not have to wait for Eternity to punish or reward. The advancing day may bring, usually does bring, a certain amount of necessary disillusionment to the bright dreams of early morning. The man of Faith knows all that and awaits the calm evening of life with Faith undimmed, heart undismayed. Some astronomer wrote these words for his tombstone:

“I have spent my life among the stars and I do not fear the night.”

Mary Potter had spent her life close to the Maternal Heart of the Immaculate Virgin. It sheltered her in the early morning, it protected her in the blaze of noonday, and became, more than ever, her resting place as the evening shadows deepened into night. The useless regrets, the disappointed bitterness of soul, that mar the peace of the self-seeking had no place in her life. Life could take nothing from her who had the fulness of God.

During the last few years she became a complete invalid.

“She could not lie down, and was obliged to retain, even when sleeping, an upright position. Periodically she had severe attacks of fever, which left her thoroughly exhausted, and for several years she was unable to digest or retain solid food. To these torments was added the distress caused by a tumour in the shoulder-joint of her left arm, which pulsed like the sharp pangs of a discipline administered unceasingly.

“Mother Mary’s cell, now the private oratory of the Mother House, was accessible to all who needed her advice. The door was always open, and neither her physical sufferings nor her weakness were permitted to interfere with the duties of her office. She received all who came to her with a welcoming smile and affectionate words. Her sweetness of manner, and the keen interest she showed in all their affairs, belied the seriousness of her condition, and often visitors, as well as many of her own Sisters, failed to realise how really ill she was.”

Numberless are the anecdotes of her wonderful charity, of extraordinary answers to her prayers; of her boundless trust in the Maternal Heart of Mary. She had, in particular, a most extraordinary devotion to the priesthood. Priests were the object of her special love and solicitude:

“Just as she had reserved the head of the cross in her material design especially for those sufferers dedicated to God so she gave to priests in general the chief place in her prayers, her sufferings and her actions. She offered herself a victim daily for them, particularly those who had become outcasts from the Mystical Body of Christ”

There was, of course, besides, her unceasing solicitude for the dying. Withal there was the same happy, almost irrepressible, spirit that, in her early days, so alarmed the serious Godfrey King. Like all people gifted with a keen appreciation of the weakness of poor human nature, she ever preserved a saving sense of humour.

### HER WRITINGS

One last legacy she left to her Sisters, and, for that matter, to all souls treading the Path of Mary, and this was a series of spiritual writings—entirely devoted to the practice of De Montfort’s True Devotion. These were the fruit of long hours of prayerful meditation, penetrating study and mature deliberation, strengthened by a long experience of the needs of souls striving after the perfect service of God through Mary. They have received unstinted approval from

both the clergy and the laity. The list comprises:— “The Spiritual Exercises of Mary.”

“The Human Life of Jesus.”

“God’s Human Family.”

“Man Mirroring His Maker” (for students to the priesthood).

“Mary’s Conferences.”

“Mary’s Call.”

“Our Lady’s Retreat”

“Brides of Christ.”

“May Papers.”

“Loves in the Heart of Mary.”

“Saturday.”

“Spiritual Maternity” (for Superiors).

All these can be procured at Lewisham Hospital, Sydney, or from any other Convent of the Little Company of Mary.

Of these, “The Spiritual Exercises of Mary” is of exceptional value as an immediate preparation for undertaking the Holy Slavery of Mary.

### **THE CALVARY CONFRATERNITY**

One other work of Mary Potter deserves mention. That is the “Calvary Confraternity for the Dying.” it is an effort to enlist the co-operation of all Catholics in a league of constant prayer for those in their agony. This union of prayer was approved by Pope Leo XIII. It was enriched with several indulgences by the Sacred Congregation in July, 1895. Since then, various Popes have added their signatures to the growing number of those who daily pray for the dying. No special prayer is imposed. The only obligation is to pray daily for those who are in their agony.

### **“PRECIOUS ... IS THE DEATH OF HIS SAINTS”**

During the winter of 1912, Mother Mary had a succession of heart attacks and high fevers. Spring brought no change. On April 1, a novena was begun to obtain a recovery.

When it became known that the end was near, crowds began to gather, pressing for a last look at the woman they regarded as a saint. Pope Pius X sent a special blessing. Cardinals and other eminent ecclesiastics called daily. Her sufferings were intense, but her serenity and peace were unsurpassable.

On April 4, Father Luke Carey, O.F.M., from the Irish Franciscan College, “loyal and faithful friend,” celebrated Mass in her room and administered the Last Sacraments.

Finally, on the evening of Wednesday, April 9, 1913, at 6.15 pm., the end came. The Community had been summoned. While Father Benedict Williamson, who had known Mother Mary since his student days, read the commendation of a departing soul, Mother Mary Potter, without “sob or resistance” peacefully, faithfully, made her last act of surrender to the All Holy Will of God, as a Slave of Mary.

### **PRAYER FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF MOTHER MARY POTTER**

In accordance with the usual procedure of the Church, the following prayer has been approved for private use only:

“O Almighty and Eternal God, Who dost glorify those who glorify Thee, and Who hast vouchsafed to give us in Thy servant, Mother Mary Potter, a wonderful example of every virtue, and especially of charity, love for Jesus in the Most Holy Eucharist, and of His Blessed Mother at the foot of the Cross when the sword of sorrow her maternal heart had pierced, compassion for the poor and suffering, zeal for souls, and abandonment to Thy Most Holy Will, grant, we beseech Thee, that imitating her virtues, we may be able to overcome our inordinate passions, and grow in the love of Jesus and Mary and in compassion for the poor and suffering humanity.

“And, if it be in accordance with the designs of Thy most holy Will that this, Thy servant, should be glorified by the Church, deign by Thy heavenly favours to manifest the power that she enjoys in Thy sight. All this we ask through the merits of Jesus Christ Our Lord, Who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth for ever and ever. Amen.

“Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory. . .

## MOTHER'S LAST WORDS

It is finished: Most blessed words. Sweet Jesus: It is finished. Can it be this world is finished for me?

What happy work; was it weary work? Oh no; there may have been one view of the road that frightened weak human nature, where we saw the road. Its dangers, its seeming darkness, we saw as it were all the trials, the struggles in one view, we saw them without Thee, Sweet Jesus. Yes, as many view the Cross without the loving, beautiful Body. Yes, without the loving Jesus on it, how hard was the Cross? We set out with the brightness of Spring, hopeful, happy, but was it the ending of our long journey? To what can we compare this rest of spirit, this content of our last days, of earth? Jesus, speak for me to my children, for I would bid them farewell in words that would encourage them, and urge them on. What shall I tell them from the heart too full of words? What I speak I speak from Thee, for Thou dost live in me. Thou art more present to me than I am to myself. Thou hast lived, and I have laboured from Thy indwelling in me, and my labours have been labours of love. Happy has been my life, God's mercy would have it so. Too full of joy for a sinful creature of earth, living in sinful world, but Thou wouldst have it so. Thou wouldst have me glorify Thee. Angels guard the house where God evoked so great a work; visited by the Blessed Trinity has been that earthly humble house. Give it to my children, keep it for them, and let prayers and praise be offered there. St. Cecilia, thy palace pleased thee when consecrated as a church, for this you prayed and suffered. Offer now a prayer and give to mine my house where Jesus loved and bound me to Himself. This I ask if it be pleasing to the Most High. "Abba Father" of my Lord Jesus Christ, from Mary's arms, from Mary's heart, I send my prayer as I thank Thee in these days for all Thou hast done for me. I give to Thee the life Thou gavest me. Mother, speak for Thy child whose heart so full must break if much more love be poured into it. Angels raise your voice. Thank my God for child of earth, unworthy. Saints praise Him for His power. His condescension to a sinful child of earth may soil the soul that hastens to her God, her journey ended, her work finished, hidden in the Heart of Jesus. Ended, my God. Is it possible? The years have flown so swiftly. My God, the days you showed me gave me choice, when longing so to come to Thee, live to save sinners or die and go and enjoy Thee? Since then, what has been!

Nihil obstat:

F. MOYNIHAN,  
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

\* DANIEL MANNIX,  
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.

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