Spring 1999

By What Authority? The Founding of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati

Judith Metz S.C.

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol20/iss1/4

This Articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.
By What Authority?
The Founding of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati

BY
JUDITH METZ, S.C.

Six Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati, Ohio, exercised their own authority on 25 March 1852 when they took their vows, naming Archbishop John Purcell as their superior. With this act they inaugurated a new congregation of women religious. Their journey had been a long one: from September 1849 when they received word that their superiors in Emmitsburg, Maryland, had affiliated their community with the Daughters of Charity in France to this bittersweet day in the early spring of 1852. For these six women it had been a time of soul searching and self-examination, a time of claiming their own inner authority in opposition to the directives of their religious superiors, a time of courageous decision making, and of defining for themselves the meaning of their relationship with God and with God’s people.

What forces were at work in church and society, as well as within their own congregation, which brought these six women to this day in 1852? What enabled them to make the heart-wrenching decision to sever their ties with friends and community, to open themselves to the accusation that they were violating their vows of obedience, to be willing to begin anew after years of commitment and service? Six factors will be considered which, in my estimation, contributed significantly to their decision to found the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

I. American Milieu

The background of each of these six women suggests that she was imbued with the “American spirit” at a time when the United States was energetically engaged in creating itself as a nation. Although two were Irish immigrants, Margaret George and Anthony O’Connell, they arrived here as children, were educated here and were thoroughly enculturated. The remaining four, Sophia Gilmeyer, Josephine Harvey, Regina Mattingly and Antonia McCaffrey, were natives of Maryland, New York, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania respectively.

Extant information for five of them indicates that they received
the best education available to young women in the early nineteenth century. Each completed schooling at an academy prior to her entrance into the Sisters of Charity.¹ Albeit that their education was directed toward making them "good wives and mothers," these schools proved themselves an emerging force for social transformation.² Their education was distinctively American, and they would probably fall under the description given by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 when he noted that "... in America [women] are taught to be independent, to think for themselves, to speak with freedom, and to act on their own impulses."³

These were women who grew up with democracy, freedom of expression, and a belief in the uniqueness of the American experience. As Americans, they possessed a positive attitude toward change, newness, and the promise of the future. They were intelligent, competent women who, throughout their lifetimes, exhibited strong and dynamic leadership qualities. Most were involved in the founding and directing of works of the Sisters of Charity and served as superiors within the community. As circumstances in the United States dictated, women religious provided for their own financial needs and day-to-day management of their institutions, a situation which fostered self-reliance and confidence in their own judgment. They were creative women who were prepared to strike out independently when circumstances necessitated, as shown by their actions in 1852.

These women found themselves together in Cincinnati in the mid-nineteenth century, a period of great vitality within the nation. Jacksonian democracy ushered in political changes which engendered unprecedented political participation. There was a changing locus of authority within society with control passing from a well established elite to champions of the common man. The trans-Appalachian region was heady with growth, and Cincinnati had established herself as the "Queen of the West." The city's economic development and popula-

¹ Margaret George's formal education probably occurred at Madame Lacombe's private school in Baltimore in the 1790s prior to the establishment of academies. Known for her 'superior intellect and varied accomplishments,' she was well educated in French, history, and mathematics. (Bio, 5, 84). Sophia Gilmeyer was educated at Saint Joseph's Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland; Anthony O'Connell at the Ursuline Academy in Charlestown, Massachusetts; Josephine Harvey at Saint John's Academy in Frederick, Maryland; and Regina Mattingly at the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Academy near Morganfield, Kentucky. No records are available for Antonio McCaffrey.

² Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 44.

John B. Purcell, Bishop and Archbishop of Cincinnati from 1833 to 1883, sponsored the establishment of the diocesan congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Courtesy Archives, Mount St. Joseph, OH

tion explosion yielded a dynamic social and cultural environment. Peopled by an eclectic mix of city folks, farmers, transients, and immigrants, the atmosphere allowed women roles not found in more staid environments. The expanding river traffic accompanying the development of the steamboat, together with the momentum of the westward movement, made the city a bustling metropolis. Its geographic position on the Ohio River ensured its place as a cosmopolitan crossroads as well as a destination for many visitors of note, both American and European. Industry, trade, publishing and the arts flourished as it grew to be the fifth largest city in the country.

Part of the dynamism of this period was the plethora of reform movements that swept through American society. The temperance movement was among the most popular since it dealt with an issue

---

4 George W. Knepper, Ohio and Its People (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University, 1989), 125.
which touched many families. Well organized groups existed throughout Ohio by the 1840s, with women among the most active supporters.

The Father Matthew Temperance Society represented the Catholic expression of this movement. In 1851 its namesake preached in Cincinnati for the benefit of Saint Peter's Orphan Asylum, the Sisters of Charity ministry in the city. It is probable that Father Matthew was among the many visitors that Archbishop John Purcell brought to Saint Peter's, where the sisters would have the opportunity to engage him in conversation.

The abolitionist movement was also strong in Ohio, and particularly in Cincinnati, which straddled the border between the slave and the free states. The city had strong economic ties with the South and support for the southern way of life was strong. On the other hand, many freedmen, runaway slaves, and outspoken abolitionists made Cincinnati their home. Consequently, tensions frequently ran high and periodically erupted into riots throughout the ante bellum period. Living in the midst of this charged atmosphere was part of the Cincinnati experience.

Women's "awakening" during the 1840s was based on their participation in the social movements of the time. Through their experiences they came to realize they were among the marginalized and oppressed. The 1848 women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, was followed closely by one in Ohio in 1850. Two years later the Ohio Women's Rights Association was formed. We cannot doubt that the sisters were aware of these events. A description of Margaret George, the superior of the Cincinnati mission after 1845, notes that [she] "speaks the French language like a Parisian, reads the newspapers . . . , and is intimately posted on all great national topics of the hour."

Another social movement of the period was the nativist movement which directed its activities to attacking immigrants and Catholics. Cincinnati was one of the strongholds of their activities. In the

---

5 Ibid, 181.
7 Knepper, 182-183.
8 *The Catholic Telegraph*, Cincinnati, 29 January 1862.
twenty-year period of 1835-1855 the population of the city increased five-fold from 31,000 to 152,000. A significant proportion of the newcomers were German and Irish Catholic immigrants. As early as 1830 local newspapers were reporting that the Sisters of Charity and Saint Peter's Asylum were recipients of a bitter spirit of intolerance.\(^9\) Catholics were accused of being un-American, and serving as agents of the Pope and of other foreign powers. By the end of the decade discussions were underway for the formation of a Native American Party (Know-Nothings) in Cincinnati. Throughout the 1840s the virulence of the attacks increased. Catholics were constantly on the alert to protect themselves and their property from harm.

With the sisters being such visible representatives of the Catholic Church, they too were subjected to threats and harassment, as exemplified by a visit of Sister Anthony O'Connell to the Fifth Street Market House. Setting off with two orphan girls and an empty basket, she ventured onto streets where sisters were always at risk of insult. While pushing through crowded passages at the market, a big, stout young butcher taunted her by picking up a bull pup that was dozing under one of the benches and throwing it into her basket, breaking the basket and scattering bystanders.\(^10\)

This environment required the sisters to be ready to adapt to their environment and meet the circumstances at hand. Being far from their motherhouse at a time when communication and travel were slow, it was up to them to discern how best to carry out their ministry. This too was part of the American milieu by which the sisters were formed and influenced.

**II. Changing Climate of the American Church**

The Republican period of American Catholicism was the setting for the foundation of Elizabeth Seton's Sisters of Charity. John Carroll, the first bishop in the newly established American church, set the tone for this early stage of development. He embodied classical humanism and advocated a constitutional and conciliar structure for the church. His support for the rights of the individual and appreciation for American pluralism and denominationalism reflected the values of


\(^10\) "A Bit of Chivalry," undated newspaper clipping, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
the new republic. Carroll enthusiastically accepted the concept of separation of church and state, and embraced an open-hearted ecumenism which led to his wide participation in civic affairs. The central role of the laity and the need for the American church to maintain a measure of autonomy in its relationship with the Holy See were also cornerstones of his approach to church governance.

It was within this ecclesial climate that the Sisters of Charity took root. Elizabeth Seton deeply admired Carroll, and was influenced by him from her earliest days as a Catholic. Early struggles with priest-superiors were an indication of Elizabeth's intention to ensure that the sisters' interests were represented in the governance of the community. These incidents, plus a later collaborative relationship, became the operational model she established. The sisters' financial independence, as well as their insistence on flexibility and adaptability, set the tone for their mission and ministry.

Openness to culture and immersion in their society were inherent principles for them. Examples of this can be seen in their insistence on accepting Protestant students into their school despite clerical advice to the contrary, or in Elizabeth's delight in having African-Americans as her own pupils in the slave society of Maryland. The sisters' optimistic view of the human person and their belief in the accessibility of a loving God, all point to these women as shining products of their age. When Elizabeth Seton emphasized with the sisters that they were made in God's image and that their free will was the noblest of God's gifts, she was instilling in them a sense of the goodness and dignity of their personhood and their ability to act as autonomous individuals.

William DuBourg and the Sulpician priests who served as directors of the community embodied this same optimistic spirit. John Dubois, who served as priest-superior of the Sisters of Charity from 1811 until his appointment as bishop of New York, as well as his successor Reverend Louis Deluol, were men who embodied the Americanization of their French society's charism. They were infused with the Republican ethos, and possessed an expansive openness to the local church. Deluol was referred to as an Americanizer by some of his

---

confreres and ultimately experienced conflict with his French superiors over his leadership style and liberal interpretation of the rule.\textsuperscript{13}

By the same token the Bishop of Cincinnati, John Purcell, under whom the Sisters of Charity served in that city, represented a similar ecclesiology. Purcell met both internal and external Catholic issues of the period with tolerance and a spirit of compromise. He respected the lay role in the church and amicably worked with the trustee system. This Irish-born bishop was noted for his ability to get along with a strongly German Catholic population as he worked diligently to accommodate their needs. He consistently maintained a spirit of civility as he addressed his opponents and critics.\textsuperscript{14}

It was in this spirit that the Sisters of Charity were nurtured and matured as a community. As mid-century approached, however, the climate within the Universal Church, as well as within the American Church, was changing. A different understanding and practice of liturgy, prayer, authority, and morality began to develop. In the United States this change was reflected in the emergence of the immigrant period.

One characteristic of this period was an emphasis on hierarchical authority. The number of dioceses grew to twenty-six by mid-century, and the role of the local bishop became central to the church-life of the people. The influx of millions of Catholic European immigrants influenced both the structure and the spiritual life of the church. Operations became more clerically oriented, with the laity relegated to the role of obedient subjects. The secular world came to be regarded as hostile, and an enclave mentality among Catholics came to exist. At the same time an emphasis on the sinful nature of humankind led to a prayer life that stressed appeasement of a distant and judgmental God.\textsuperscript{15}

Over a period of years the Catholic church in the United States took on this character, in opposition to its republican beginnings. The changes were uneven, depending on the local bishop. Since the Sisters of Charity worked in a number of dioceses in varied types of ministries, many sponsored by the local church, they were affected by this new spirit. As they experienced episcopal authority challenging the


\textsuperscript{14} Anthony Deye, "Archbishop John Purcell: Pre Civil War Years" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1949).

control of community superiors in some dioceses, they, in turn, felt challenged to respond. Our contemporary church, with its conflicting ecclesiology, provides us with a sense of the tensions and adjustments that American Catholics and the Sisters of Charity living in the mid-nineteenth century might have experienced.

III. Strong Roots in Pioneer Beginnings of the Sisters of Charity

No consideration of the events on the Cincinnati mission in 1852 can be undertaken without examining the role of Margaret George. Sister Servant there at the time, she was a pioneer member of the community whose friendship with Elizabeth Seton pre-dated the formation of the Sisters of Charity. Having known each other in Baltimore in 1808-09, when Elizabeth moved to Emmitsburg, Margaret both corresponded with and visited her there.\textsuperscript{16} Joining the Sisters of

\textsuperscript{16} Metz and Wiltse, 7, 12, 13.
Charity in 1812, Margaret, along with Elizabeth Seton, was a member of the first novitiate and vow group. She taught in the school, served on some of the early councils and was intimately familiar with Elizabeth's vision for the community.

Margaret George's early community years in Emmitsburg formed the basis of her life as a Sister of Charity. She frequently referred to these happy days when Elizabeth Seton was "the center of our happenings" and "there was but one heart and one soul." "We loved her and she reciprocated that love," she recalled. "Distance nor time nor any of the accidents of this passing life can cause me to forget the friends and Sisters of our early days in the valley," she wrote to another founding member years later.

Characteristic of this foundation period of the Sisters of Charity, with which Margaret George identified so closely, is the central role of the founding person. Historians and sociologists of religion enumerate other features of this period, including close personal relationships with the founder, the founder's ideals serving as the primary source of authority among the members, structural identity appearing only in seminal form, and an equivocal attitude toward the written Constitutions. It is only in the later stages of development that written rules take on the character of primary forces in the lives of the individual sisters.

One indication of the strong ties Margaret George felt with this early period is that she took on the role of record keeper. She realized clearly the importance of preserving the history of the establishment so it could be faithfully passed on to new generations of sisters. In "The Treasurer's Book," she painstakingly compiled a record of the age, year of entrance, and background information for each woman who entered the community from its beginning in 1809 to the early 1840s. On the flyleaf she wrote: "I would express a wish that [this list] may be continued . . . ."20

Another record Margaret kept during one of her periods of service as treasurer of the community was a daily journal, "The Diary of Saint

17 Margaret George to Cecilia O’ Conway, from Boston, 8 May 1843, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
18 Margaret George to Cecilia O’ Conway, from Cincinnati, 10 October 1848, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
In addition to these community histories, Margaret George kept personal journals recounting her experiences in opening and directing the missions at Frederick, Maryland, and Richmond, Virginia, and of directing missions in Boston and Cincinnati. The importance she placed on journal keeping is testimony to the value she placed on her own experience and on passing on the stories of the early community. She took seriously her role as storyteller, not only in written but in oral form. While writing to a friend of the early days about the sisters on the Cincinnati mission, she commented, "None of whom you know [but] they know you as I have frequently spoken of you and the old times."21

From the time of their foundation, the American Sisters of Charity incorporated flexibility and adaptation to culture into their mode of operation. They adopted a modified version of the Vincentian rule to fit their circumstances, and they responded to their culture by accepting responsibility for the care of boys and generally learning the practical lessons of living and working in their society. An 1832 incident within the Cincinnati mission provides an example of the latitude sisters took in making adjustments they deemed necessary. Two sisters arrived early in the year, one assigned to the mission there, the other on her way to Saint Louis. Fanny Jordan, the Sister Servant, and a member of Elizabeth Seton's founding circle, took it upon herself to switch their assignments because she felt the sister assigned to Saint Louis better fit the needs at Saint Peter's in Cincinnati.22 Although Fanny was reprimanded by her superiors, her action was allowed to stand.

Margaret George, too, adopted a flexible approach to rules. Upon her arrival to open the mission in Frederick, she wrote to Mother Rose White, checking on necessary adjustments to the rule while assuming responsibility for making others.23 Many of the members of the founding circle were mature and experienced individuals before joining the Sisters of Charity. These early sisters felt free to express their opinions, make suggestions to superiors, and, as indicated above, adjust to local conditions.

---

21 Margaret George to Cecilia O'Conway, from Cincinnati, 10 October 1848, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
23 Mother Rose White (Emmitsburg, Maryland: Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 1936), 117, 119.
Margaret George is a case in point. Born in Ireland, her family immigrated to the United States when she was a young girl. Shortly after their arrival, she and her mother were left to their own resources. The young woman received a good education, married, and had a child before she entered the Sisters of Charity. She worked in community administration, as well as directing schools and orphanages, and while engaged in these activities developed strong working relationships with priests such as John McElroy, S.J., the pastor at Frederick; John Hickey, S.S., the priest-superior of the community while she was treasurer in the late 1830s; and John Purcell, the bishop of Cincinnati. She respected but did not idolize these clerics, and was able to work with them in a collaborative manner.

Margaret’s spirituality centered around doing God’s will and being a good Sister of Charity. She was generous and open. As she told a friend, “... my disposition is to go and come as Superiors see fit.” Introspective and reflective, she kept diaries and journals filled with poems, quoted material, and personal notes. In her retreat notes she explored in depth the meaning of being a Sister of Charity. She identified the importance of being available to the poor without reserve and being willing to bear anything for charity. “Charity is above every rule,” she writes. “Everything must be subjected to her. . . . It is the interior spirit and not the dress which makes a Daughter of Charity. The love of God and our neighbors, love of the poor and union with each other make one interior habit.”

This was a woman of prayer and a woman of courage who had, by the early 1850s, already dedicated 40 years to the service of God’s people. As sister servant of the Cincinnati mission she was by far the experienced veteran. In addition she was among only a few of the founding group still active in the community, placing her in a venerable circle of “elders.” A woman whose ideas and judgments would have carried substantial weight among the sisters at a critical time, she undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the course of events which led to the severing of ties with the motherhouse.

---

24 Margaret George to Cecilia O’Conway, from Boston, 31 December 1843, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
Saint Peter in Chains, dedicated in 1845, continues to serve as the cathedral church of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. 

Courtesy Archives, Mount St. Joseph, OH

IV. Identification With the Local Church

From the time of their arrival in Cincinnati in 1829, the Sisters of Charity were integral to the delivery of Catholic social services. The 1830s and 1840s witnessed an exponential growth in the Catholic population, many of these being poor immigrants. The number of parishes grew from one to twelve in these decades, with others to follow in rapid succession. A bitter anti-Catholic spirit resulted in frequent agitation and threats of violence. Bishop John Purcell's attempts to address this climate in the public schools only resulted in increased virulence, and turned him into a committed champion of parochial schools and Catholic-sponsored services for his flock.

Amidst this environment Sisters of Charity offered vital services at Saint Peter’s Orphan Asylum and School. In fact, until 1840 they were the only women religious in the city. As early as 1834, Bishop John Purcell had begun a search for additional communities, and beginning in 1835 he sent an almost yearly appeal to Emmitsburg for more sisters. His requests were frequently on behalf of the German Catholics who were attempting to establish a boys orphan asylum.

Meanwhile Saint Peter’s was growing by leaps and bounds. During the 1840s, in an attempt to keep up a three-fold growth in the number of orphan girls, three additions were made to the building. During the 1848 cholera epidemic alone, 100 children were admitted, most orphaned by the ravages of the disease. By mid-century Saint Peter’s cared for 150 orphans as well as an additional 150 day students.

Besides being the linchpin of the Catholic social services offered in Cincinnati, the Sisters of Charity enjoyed a close relationship with their bishop. They had a deep respect for Bishop Purcell and appreciated his collaborative spirit. He, in turn, held them in high regard, always considering the Sisters of Charity as “old and well tried friends.” In an 1847 letter written on his birthday, he remarked to Margaret George, “I hardly expect that anyone but my poor old mother would have thought of me today, but you, my dear children, never forget.” The bishop frequently visited Saint Peter’s and often brought visitors there. When away on trips to Europe, or on summer visitations in his vast diocese, he wrote letters to the sisters, and they, in turn, sent him their own greetings and news. In her personal correspondence Margaret George manifests her warm regard, referring to him as “the kindest and best of Fathers” and “our dear Archbishop.”

It is no wonder the sisters felt so warmly toward their prelate. Bishop Purcell was an ardent worker who was deeply involved with

29 Ibid, 231.
30 John Purcell to Margaret George, from Steubenville, 25 August 1850, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
31 John Purcell to Margaret George, from Cincinnati, 26 February 1847, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
32 Mary Agnes McCann, “Archbishop Purcell and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1918), 30, 51-53.
33 Margaret George to Cecilia O’Conway, from Cincinnati, October 10, 1848, and May 6, 1852, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
his people. Frequent festivals on the cathedral grounds were evidence of the delight he took in children. Always in demand, he never refused to be available. He was ready to serve the humblest of his own churches or those of other bishops, being most accessible to the downtrodden. His humility was as great as his simplicity, hospitality and charity. He seemed to assume that he was the last to be looked after and the least to be cared for, styling himself the "little Bishop." If he loved to receive, it was only that he might give. His friends understood that personal gifts presented to him would be passed on to the poor.  

Purcell's frequent requests to obtain additional Sisters of Charity for Cincinnati were rewarded in 1842 when, to his delight, three sisters arrived to manage Saint Aloysius German Boys' Asylum. This situation was short-lived, however. Three years later the bishop received word that the community was giving up charge of all asylums and schools for boys. This was a heartbreaking turn of events to Purcell who now had 53 boys in need of caregivers. He objected to the change and tried to find replacements from the Sisters of Mercy, the

---

35 Deye, Footnote 16, 297.
Christian Brothers, and the Precious Blood Sisters. When he was unsuccessful, a lay woman was appointed superintendent. Nevertheless, he continued to consider the Sisters of Charity a main resource, preferring to appeal to Emmitsburg for additional sisters rather than recruiting other communities.

There is no record of the response of the sisters at Saint Peter’s to their community’s withdrawal from Saint Aloysius. We can assume, however, that they shared their bishop’s disappointment and empathized with the futility of his efforts. Within a few years, when other changes in their community’s governance raised questions for some of the sisters, Purcell is the one to whom they turned. His openness and compassion in their time of confusion and distress cemented their trust and mutual regard. It also opened the door for subsequent events which led to their actions of 25 March 1852.

V. Experience of the Sisters in New York

The 1846 break of 32 sisters from the Emmitsburg motherhouse to form a diocesan community in New York was a traumatic event for the Sisters of Charity both institutionally and personally. On the institutional level it precipitated the plan of their priest-superior, Reverend Louis Deluol, to unite the community with the French Daughters of Charity. On the personal level there was hardly a sister in the community who had not been on mission in New York, or who had not worked with and known at least some of these women.

From the early 1840s, when the priests associated with the community began to actively discuss the desirability of joining the American sisters with the French Daughters of Charity, the sisters were not consulted. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of unrest was present in some quarters of the community. One of the earliest proponents of the affiliation, Bishop Joseph Rosati of Saint Louis, “found opposition from prejudices and national feelings.” Beginning in 1842 Deluol

---

36 Ibid, 297.
37 The Catholic Telegraph, Cincinnati, 6 February 1987, (Special Supplement).
38 John Purcell to Margaret George, from Steubenville, 25 August 1850, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
40 Mother Etienne Hall (Emmitsburg, Maryland: Saint Joseph’s, 1939), 56.
invited Vincentian Fathers John Timon and Mariano Maller to give retreats at Emmitsburg as well as at some of the missions in order to “awaken the desire of affiliation in the sisters.” Yet, some sisters, “not a small portion . . . nor among the least influential,” desired that the community should be directed by the Jesuits.

By late 1845 the speed of change accelerated. Some sisters on the missions expressed unhappiness with the election of Mother Etienne Hall. It is possible that this feeling was because they were acquainted with her position that it was contrary to the Rule for sisters to take care of boys. And in fact, following closely upon the election, the Council at Saint Joseph’s notified the bishops concerned of the community’s plans to withdraw from the care of boys. Ultimately, it was this directive which precipitated the withdrawal of the sisters on the New York missions to form a diocesan community of Sisters of Charity in December 1846.

From this time efforts to effect the union of the sisters with France moved forward with greater intent. In keeping with the hierarchical and patriarchal mode of operation in the church, the sisters were not “formally acquainted with the union in contemplation.” Nevertheless, rumors must have abounded since Deluol was aware that there was “conjecture” about it. We can only speculate about the amount of unrest afoot within the community at this time, but there are certainly indications that it was present. Writing to Archbishop Samuel Eccleston of Baltimore in November 1845, Bishop John Hughes of New York expressed concerns about the Sisters of Charity. He reported feelings among the sisters that the primitive spirit was passing away and that the “simplicity and freedom with which it was the right and duty of its primitive members to express their opinions [were] now no more.” The sisters, he said, feared that they would soon find themselves in a community entirely different from that which they intended to join.

And, after the formal New York separation, Father Mariano Maller’s condemnation of this event was said to afford “much consolation to the sisters still in the Emmitsburg community and raised the drooping spirits of such of them as were laboring under doubts, perplexities

---

41 Ibid, 57.
42 Ibid, 58.
44 Elizabeth Boyle to Cecilia O’Conway, from New York, 11 May 1851, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
45 Kelly, 131.
47 Kelly, 132.
and apprehensions."48

We might seek to assess the impact of these currents of change on
the sisters in Cincinnati. In light of subsequent events, we can assume
that at least some of them were among those "laboring under doubts,
perplexities and apprehensions." As noted earlier, their ministry in
Cincinnati was affected by the sisters' withdrawal from Saint Aloysius
Orphan Asylum. At the time of that change, Sister Seraphine McNulty,
sister servant at Saint Aloysius and former Sister Servant at Saint
Peter's, withdrew from the community, an event which would surely
have affected such a small group on mission in the city.

The very example of the New York sisters' decision to sever
relations with their motherhouse would have been disturbing to other
sisters, especially in light of the severe attitude taken by Deluol. In
June 1846 he warned the sisters that those who chose to leave the
community would "be forever cast off, . . . consider[ed] . . . as perfect
strangers . . . . God will never bless those who will abandon our
community."49 Since his letter was written a full six months before the
departure of the New York sisters, it can be assumed that knowledge
of the harshness of Deluol's remarks, and the threatened ostracism,
would have circulated around the community.

Bringing the events in New York close to home for the Cincinnati
sisters was the fact that within a few months of the New York break
a sister on the Cincinnati mission, Lucy Ann Conklin, left the commu-
nity to transfer to New York. Accompanied by Margaret George, she
traveled to Baltimore for her formal departure. While on the east coast,
these sisters saw Deluol, who described the departing sister as going
"to join the schismatics."50 His attitude must have caused pain to
Margaret George, who was personally acquainted with the dedication
and commitment of many of the sisters in New York, as were others
among the Cincinnati sisters.

Several of the sisters had been in the same novitiate and had
served on mission with sisters who remained in New York. A long-
standing friendship existed between Margaret George and Elizabeth
Boyle, on mission in New York, both of whom were pioneer members

48 Mother Etienne Hall, 61-62.
49 Louis Deluol to the Sisters of Charity in the New York diocese, from Baltimore, 18 June 1846.
Quoted in Joseph B. Code, "Bishop John Hughes and the Sisters of Charity," reprint from Miscellanea
Historica in honorem Leonis Van Der Essen (Universitatis Catholicae in Oppido Lovaniensi, IAM, Annos
XXXV Professoris), 20.
50 Father Deluol's Diary, 2 March 1847, Sulpician Archives Baltimore.
of the community and served together on councils. Both Margaret George and Sophia Gilmeyer had been on mission in New York, and Josephine Harvey’s path had crossed those of several other New York sisters during her school days at the Frederick Academy. Extant correspondence among some of these sisters make it fair to speculate that they were in touch with each other during the period of turmoil.

The formal union of the American Sisters of Charity with the French Daughters of Charity was approved on 18 July 1849. Even before this information was promulgated to the American sisters, the priests anticipated a negative reaction. In mid-August Maller wrote to Mother Etienne suggesting, “Perhaps it would be better not to spread the news too hastily, as the unprepared minds of many sisters might suffer from it.”51 Deluol’s correspondence indicated a similar concern as he chastised one sister with the question, “Why do you call sorrowful the idea which ‘haunts’ you, whilst it should fill your heart with joy?”52 And to another he wrote, “Now, behave yourself, don’t cry—and be silent.”53

For some of the sisters in Cincinnati, the official notification of the union was the beginning of a two-and-a-half-year period of uncertainty and protest which ultimately led to their own separation from Emmitsburg, and the formation of a diocesan community. Those who joined the Cincinnati foundation clearly identified with the action of the New York sisters. In the Cincinnati Annals, after giving an account of the history of the community, including events in New York, the record states: “These [New York sisters] and the sisters in Cincinnati adhere to the old constitutions and dress adopted by Mother Seton and consequently form with their offshoots the true representatives of the original Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s.”54

VI. Changing Relationship with Emmitsburg

As the Sisters of Charity community grew numerically and increased locations and types of works it undertook, the closely-knit esprit de corps which existed in the early years gradually disappeared. Margaret George seemed to feel this change acutely. During

51 Reverend Mariano Maller to Mother Etienne, 17 August 1849, quoted in “Our Union With France,” 8.
52 Ibid, 9.
54 Annals #5, 24, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
her term on the council in the late 1830s, John Dubois, a former superior of the community, wrote to question whether sisters being sent to distant missions would be able to retain the true spirit of the foundation. Perhaps Margaret George shared his concern, for in her correspondence during the 1840s she repeatedly refers to the early days of the community, which seem to her to be gone forever. She speaks of early members and laments that, except for a few, “none remain of the first stones.” “There is something indefinably sweet in the remembrance of gone by days,” she reminisces, “where there was one heart and one soul and . . . our ever to be lamented Mother [was] the centre of our happenings. . . . Now we are a numerous body, many of our members even I have not seen scattered about these United States.” This pioneer felt she was losing touch with the motherhouse as well as with the growing community, writing to Deluol that she thought she was partially forgotten at Saint Joseph’s motherhouse.

These observations indicate that the community was evolving from its founding period to one of expansion and institutionalization. In this stage of development, second and third generation members assume prominence, and the oral tradition becomes systematized and evolves into a doctrinal statement. How to integrate the vision and hold the expanding group together while maintaining the vigor of the founding vision becomes the crisis at this time of transition.

Within the Sisters of Charity this became a period of crisis and division due to differing interpretations and expectations on the part of some of the sisters and concerned clergy, especially as it related to the issue of affiliation with France. During the founding period, there was an equivocal attitude toward some particulars in the Constitutions. Provisions in the document regarding the care of boys were not strictly followed in order to more fully respond to the needs of the culture. In 1845, however, the decision to enforce the letter of the law caused disruption in the community. A member of the founding circle reacted at the time, “How much I was surprised to hear that the Council . . . were deliberating the suppression of the poor little orphan

---

55 Kelly, 47, 81, 84, 87.
56 Margaret George to Cecilia O’Conway, from Cincinnati, 10 October 1848, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
57 Margaret George to Cecilia O’Conway, from Boston, 8 May 1843, see also 31 December 1843, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
58 Reverend Louis Deluol to Margaret George, from Baltimore, 12 April 1848, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
boys' asylums!!!! . . . What new spirit has risen in our days? Surely not Father Dubois, nor the tender-hearted Mother Seton's. For some sisters, loyalty to the ideals was more important than fulfilling specific regulations.

Administrative concerns appear to be among the most important reasons for seeking union with the Daughters of Charity. The superior, Deluol, was working to assure proper leadership for the sisters over the long haul. The bishops with whom he consulted agreed and in the process assumed the right to interpret the charism and set the direction of the community. A memoir to the bishop of the sixth provincial council of Baltimore in 1846 indicated their version of the origins of the community. It stated that the "Sisters of Charity in the United States were founded by the Most Reverend Archbishop John Carroll, under the direction of the members of Saint Sulpice." It should be noted that Elizabeth Seton is not mentioned in either of these renditions.

Another example of this assumption is a letter to Bishop Purcell, which indicated that the union with France was "only carrying out now, what was the anxious wish of the Founders of Saint Joseph: the Dubourgs, the Davids and the Dubois." It should be noted that Elizabeth Seton is not mentioned in either of these renditions.

The authoritarian approach of the priests invited no consultation with the sisters and took no account of, what were for them, very personal and emotional issues. For some sisters, at least, there was an expectation that they would be consulted and be free to express their opinions. The sense that something was afoot in the community about which they were not being informed would have contributed to feelings of isolation and disquiet.

Another consideration is that the union with France ignored American sensitivities in at least three areas. First, on a daily basis these sisters were involved in efforts to assist immigrants in adapting to their culture and environment, while their community now was moving to assume European customs. Second, for the sisters to adopt French dress and affiliation in light of the accusations of nativists that Catholics were agents of the Pope, and of foreign governments, put the sisters in a difficult position in dealing with their pluralistic soci-

60 Cecilia O'Conway to Elizabeth Boyle, from Quebec, 11 August 1846, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
61 Misner, footnote 111, 161.
62 John Joseph Chance to J.B. Purcell, from Natchez, 26 April 1850, Archives, University of Notre Dame.
63 Cf. note 47.
64 Cf. note 58.
ety. And third, the Sisters of Charity were the only community in the United States to affiliate with a European community when the trend among foundations of sisters in the United States was to sever their ties with European motherhouses. This was a strange reversal indeed for women who had joined the first American foundation of women religious.65

An additional issue which proved to be a source of differing interpretation was the question of whether Elizabeth Seton wanted to be united with France. As noted above, some of the priests involved believed that had been the vision for the community from its inception. Clearly, some of the founding members took exception to this position. They, in fact, saw the vision being misinterpreted and they recoiled. In an 1851 letter, Elizabeth Boyle, a founding member and first mother of the New York Sisters of Charity, questioned, “It has been said that our dear Mother Seton always wished to be united with France. I do not believe it, am I wrong?”66 In the same vein Margaret George stated explicitly, “Mother Seton was decidedly opposed to any such union, and frequently expressed herself to that effect.”67 Elizabeth Seton was clearly the reference point for these women. This position strongly influenced the sisters in Cincinnati who claimed Elizabeth’s authority and used it to justify the choice they made in severing their ties with Emmitsburg.

Once the union with France was approved in July 1849, Vincentian Father Mariano Maller was appointed priest-superior of the sisters in the United States. By fall he began visiting the bishops of the dioceses where sisters worked to inform them of the change in administration and rules. Bishop Purcell in Cincinnati expressed no reservations in assenting to the new arrangement for the sisters.

However, when the sisters in Cincinnati received a copy of the new vows they were to make March 1850, a long period of agitation followed. Margaret George, and those of like mind, must have felt confused and increasingly estranged by the messages they were receiving. On the one hand they were told that there were no changes of substance. But when they received the new vow formula, they

66 Elizabeth Boyle to Cecilia O’Conway, from New York, 11 May 1851, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
questioned its meaning and ramifications for them. These they con­
fided to Bishop Purcell, who gave them a compassionate hearing and
represented their concerns to both Maller and Archbishop Samuel
Eccleston of Baltimore. In his letter he described the “agitation” and
“anxiety” of the sisters and expressed concern that “they should never
have been called upon to make such vows . . . without their consent
. . . . But above all it should have not been required to make them . . .
under a threat of being no longer reputed members of a community
in which they had faithfully fulfilled their obligations.”

The threat of expulsion from the community must have conjured
up memories of the New York experience in 1846. And despite reas­
surances, the unfolding course of events convinced these sisters that
they could not accept the changes in dress, rule, and customs which
the community adopted. They felt they had entered the order in
America, and superiors had no right to transfer their allegiance with­
out their full consent. Further, they believed that it had been the
intention of Elizabeth Seton to remain an American foundation.

As some of the sisters in Cincinnati made their position known,
Margaret George became the focal point of the discussion. In Maller’s
 correspondence with his superior in France, he repeatedly blames her
for “being at the bottom” of the questioning and agitation. Even
though she is the only sister who directly communicated her concerns
to him, other sisters were opposed also. He speaks of some houses
being “really cold” to the changes, naming Baltimore in particular.

We do not have Maller’s response to Margaret George, but appar­
etly she was not persuaded by it and her opposition continued. Mean­
while, Maller was accusing her of “exciting the other sisters” and
the confessor whom he condemns as having too much influence. He
calls Bishop Purcell a “toy” of Margaret George, condemning him for
taking the group of sisters under his protection. “It is a tendency of the
country in matters of religion,” he writes. “It is an effect of Protestant­

---

68 John Purcell to Archbishop Samuel Eccleston, from Cincinnati, 26 March 1850, Archives,
Archdiocese of Baltimore.
69 Annals, Archives, Mount Saint Joseph.
70 This discussion is based on letters of Mariano Maller to J.B. Etienne, 14 April 1850, 31 December
1850, 26 July 1851, 14 March 1852, Vincentian Archives. See also Elizabeth Boyle to Cecilia O’Conway,
from New York, 5 September 1852, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.
vocation, of believing herself too important, and of the others being her dupes was certainly communicated in attitude if not in writing.

Historically, women who have spoken out or attempted to assert authority have been discouraged, ridiculed, marginalized, and silenced. And in this case Bishop Purcell, the man who supported them, was also dismissed as having “more heart than head.” A woman’s role was to be submissive, pious, and obedient. The expectation was that they would automatically and unquestioningly yield to the authority of their superiors. In the case of some of the women in Cincinnati, this did not happen. Margaret George was, by this time, nearly sixty-five years old and in the community forty years. Her age and accumulated wisdom gave her a detachment from others’ opinions and a confidence in living her own truth. In one of her poems she exhorts herself to “make your vows to God alone.” This strong sense of herself, with God alone as her focus, accompanied her claim to a legitimate role as interpreter of the community charism. She had known and worked with Bishop Carroll, Fathers DuBourg, Babade, and Dubois, besides Elizabeth Seton herself and all her early companions. She knew as well as anyone what the vision and intentions for the community were.

Margaret George and her five companions in Cincinnati were convinced by their culture, their experience, and their prayerful reflection that they needed to choose another course. They began making plans to leave the community. Then Bishop Purcell offered them the option to remain in Cincinnati and form a diocesan congregation of Sisters of Charity under his sponsorship. Choosing this, they made their vows on 25 March 1852, as Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. 

---

71 Lerner, 282.
72 Mariano Maller to J.B. Etienne, 14 March 1852, Vincentian Archives.
73 For a detailed discussion of the course of these events in Cincinnati, see: Judith Metz, S.C., “The Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati 1829-1852,” Vincentian Heritage 17, no. 3 (1996): 201-244, and Judith Metz, S.C., and Virginia Wiltse, Sister Margaret Cecilia George: A Biography (Mount Saint Joseph: Sisters of Charity, 1989).
By What Authority?

By what authority did these sisters choose?

— by the authority they took to interpret the original spirit and tradition of the community and of the legacy they believed Elizabeth Seton had bequeathed to them.

— by the authority of the confidence they had in their own prayer and discernment to listen to the workings of the Spirit in their lives.

— by the authority and strength of their relationships with each other, and through Margaret George, with Elizabeth Seton.

— by the authority of "knowing with their hearts" that, despite opposition, the only course of action open to them was that which expressed their most deeply held values and beliefs.