

Fall 2005

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Joseph McCann C.M., Ph.D.

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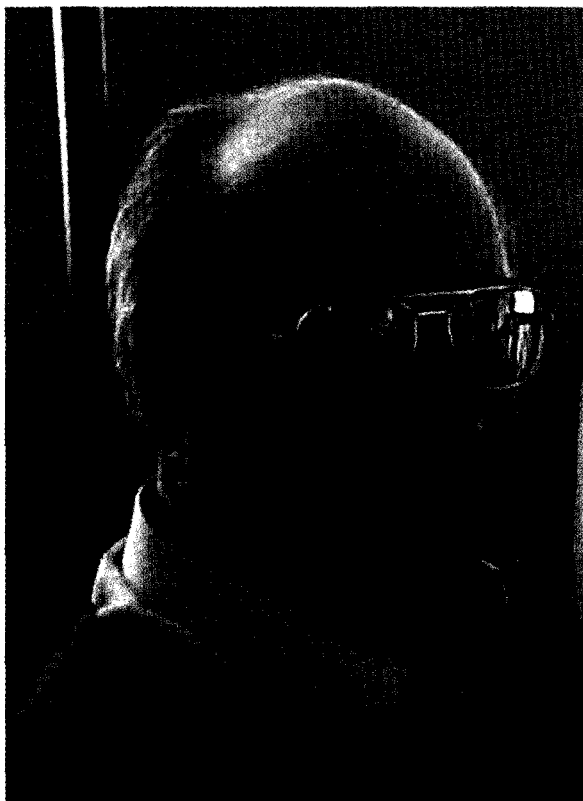
McCann, Joseph C.M., Ph.D. (2005) "Sister Gen: A Case Study of Vincentian Leadership," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol26/iss1/11>

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## **Sister Gen: A Case Study of Vincentian Leadership**

BY  
JOSEPH McCANN, C.M., Ph.D.



Joseph McCann, C.M., Ph.D.  
*Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project*

## *Introduction*

A former Prime Minister of Ireland, Garrett Fitzgerald, once complained: "That's all very well in practice, but how does it work in theory?" Theory and practice represent the opposite poles of knowledge and experience. Saint Vincent de Paul famously advocated the primacy in time of experience over knowledge, in imitation of Jesus, who, he said, first began to do, and then to teach. Saint Vincent de Paul always salted his advice with an anecdote illustrating how it was true in practice. This is a very Christian urge. We rely on exemplary people to show us how to put ideals and ideas into practice. Heroes and saints point the way, define the possible, and motivate the follower.

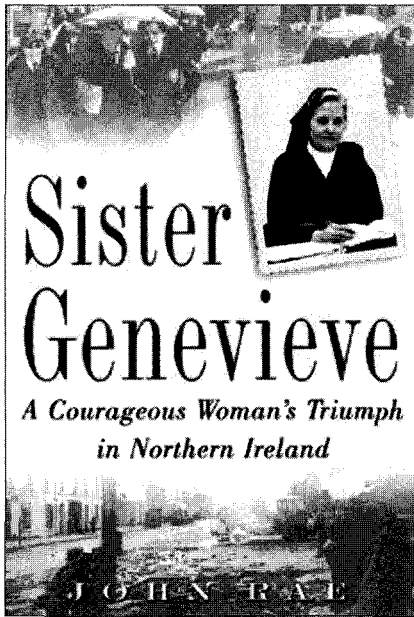
Sister Genevieve O'Farrell, Daughter of Charity of the Ireland Province, was principal of Saint Louise's Comprehensive College in Belfast from 1961 to 1988. She was unquestionably a leader. Everyone who dealt with her, students, staff, fellow educators, priests, civil servants, parents and fellow Daughters of Charity will attest to the fact that she made a mark on Catholic education in Belfast and in Northern Ireland. All who knew her will also attest that she did it out of religious conviction. She herself often articulated what she was doing in explicitly Vincentian terms. The tale of Sister Genevieve is moving, exemplary, and inspiring; it is also challenging, problematic and paradoxical. It raises questions from which all can learn.

For these reasons, the career of Sister Genevieve is worth examining as a case study of Vincentian Leadership. This article is divided into five parts:

- 1) A description of Genevieve's leadership achievement.
- 2) Her leadership *ad extra* (outside) as an educator for the community.
- 3) Her leadership *ad intra* (inside) as a principal of the school.
- 4) Genevieve's formation as a Daughter of Charity and educator.
- 5) And finally, lessons drawn from her story.

### *1. Leadership Achievement*

John Rae, a headmaster of an English public school himself, was so fascinated by meeting Sister Genevieve that he became a personal friend and wrote her biography because "her story was too



John Rae's book, upon which this article relied.

*Courtesy of the author*

interesting to be left untold.”<sup>1</sup> His book will provide much material for this presentation. The British Broadcasting Corporation was also attracted by the success of Saint Louise’s principal, and planned a television documentary about her. The date arranged for the school visit coincided with the death of the first hunger striker, Bobby Sands, in 1981. So the camera crew was present for more dramatic events than they had bargained for. Accordingly, the program records Sister Genevieve’s leadership ‘under fire’ from an unusually close vantage.<sup>2</sup> Sister Nuala Kelly, a Daughter of Charity and long-time companion of Sister Genevieve, supplied me with her talks, papers and articles. I discussed Genevieve’s career with Nuala, other Daughters of Charity and secondary school teachers, and a former student of Saint Louise’s. Lastly, obituaries on the occasion of her funeral in 2002 were another

<sup>1</sup> John Rae, *Sister Genevieve* (London: Time Warner), 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Forty Minutes” Program, *Sister Genevieve* (British Broadcasting Corporation); broadcast in October 1981.

comment on her achievement and impact.<sup>3</sup> The conclusions are, of course, my own.

**Foundation of Saint Louise's, 1958.** Sister Genevieve O'Farrell was appointed to Belfast in 1956 to teach in Saint Vincent's Girls Primary School on the Falls Road. The Falls Road is a Catholic enclave between Protestant areas and then, as now, was a humanly and economically depressed area of Belfast. At that time, Sister Vincent Wallace was the principal of Saint Vincent's Primary. She believed that local women could pick up the area, through their resilience, energy, strength, and hope. Sister Vincent inducted her new teacher quickly into her policies and methods. These included home visitation to meet the families, a sustained effort to improve the reputation of the school, determination to raise the expectations of parents and pupils, and an energetic commitment to the interests of the pupils, even the more difficult ones.

In 1957, the Ministry of Education in Northern Ireland and the Catholic Diocese proposed, agreed, and built a new secondary school for Catholic girls – Saint Louise's Girls Secondary Intermediate School – on the Falls Road. Sister Ita was appointed principal and Sister Genevieve the new vice principal.

**Expansion and 'The Troubles,' 1968-1988.** From the start, the two sisters formed a partnership that amounted to a 'good cop-bad cop' team. Ita presided over the school, Genevieve was the one who made things happen in the classroom, corridor and courtyard. When Ita took sick in 1961, 'Sister Gen' was her natural successor as acting principal, and then as principal. Recovered, Ita returned as vice principal, resuming their partnership until her formal retirement in 1977. After that she stayed on in a pastoral and teaching capacity, and finally left the school at the same time as her partner in 1988.

850 students turned up on the first day. By 1961 there were 1000. In 1968, two events happened that would affect Sister Genevieve and Saint Louise's. Both events were surprises. The first was the decision, by the Diocese and the Ministry, to double the size of the school from 1000 to 2000 students. The second was the outbreak of violence marking the beginning of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>3</sup> Anne McHardy, "Resolute head whose dreams of educational excellence surmounted Belfast violence," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2002; Mary O'Hara, "She was the only man on the Falls Road," *The Guardian*, January 21, 2002; "Past pupils mourn former headmistress," *Irish Independent*, January 2, 2002.

Through the succeeding years Sister Genevieve's prime purpose was to keep the school running, and the remarkable thing was that the school did keep functioning. Nothing was allowed to upset the routine. Standards were set high, uniforms were insisted upon, punctuality and homework was demanded. Outside in the streets, there was riot and chaos, but inside was a haven of learning. Keeping discipline, purpose and direction in such political conditions was difficult enough, but at a time of rapid expansion, it was an extraordinary achievement that a school located amidst the heart of violence in Northern Ireland grew to be the "largest second level girls' school in Europe."

Saint Louise's maintained the vision from the old Saint Vincent's (the primary school closed in 1989). A sixth form started in 1962. It became usual that students stayed past the compulsory age of schooling. In 1981, the year of the BBC programme, Mary O'Hara, the daughter of an unemployed bricklayer from the Lower Falls, entered Saint Louise's, having failed the Eleven Plus qualifying examination for a grammar school. In time, she became head girl, an excellent debater, actress and dramatic producer, passed her Advanced Level subjects, entered college, and in 1991, earned a First Class degree. Sister Gen (now retired from the principalship) proudly attended on the occasion of Mary O'Hara's graduation – at Cambridge University. A decade later Mary O'Hara would write an obituary for her former principal in the *Guardian* newspaper.

**Assessment.** Nobody is neutral on the subject of Sister Genevieve. She is – her own words – "a sign of contradiction," attracting both tribute and criticism. She had her admirers, but she had her enemies too. Her critics and her admirers included Sinn Fein and I.R.A. supporters, British soldiers, principals in surrounding schools, students, parents and teachers, and parish priests and clergy. Everyone unites in agreeing that she was a formidable presence. You could ignore neither her nor her school. She made sure of that. People called her various things, "Margaret Thatcher with a spiritual dimension," "a marvelous person," "a ruthless saint." A former Protestant paramilitary called her "the greatest person I ever met in my life." A British Minister of State called her "the nearest to a saint that I have ever been privileged to meet." The Dean of Education in the University of Ulster praised her as "the best man on the Falls Road." John Rae came to the following conclusion: "It is not unusual for persons in authority, particularly when the authority is

exercised over the young, to divide opinion and inspire very different emotions... The weight of opinion is firmly on the side of admiration for her achievements." One of her students made probably the fairest comment: "the things that made us love her, made others hate her."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *Leadership Ad Extra*

Sister Genevieve's term as principal of Saint Louise's had implications both for the school and the community in which it was situated. Genevieve was aware of that. She had to act in a highly charged educational and political atmosphere, and it is important to note how she dealt with these complications.

**Education on the Falls.** When Saint Vincent's Primary School was established, the Belfast linen mills were the traditional employers for girls. The system was half-time work for the young girls. The school educated the 'half timers' on their days off. The policy of Saint Vincent's was to give the girls a basic education so that they could find a job outside the mills. By 1958, the mills had closed, and the Falls Road area was depressed.

The tradition of the mill girls, however, had continued. The Falls Road girls were uncultivated, rough at the edges, and defiant. Those from the Upper Falls had a lower middle class background, but those from the Lower Falls, though possessing a strong sense of community, were caught in a grinding poverty trap. For Sister Genevieve and the Daughters of Charity, education was the answer. But there was no point getting the girls past their school examinations if there would be no real respect in the world of work.

**Opposition to Grammar Schools.** The 1947 Education Act made universal schooling to second level United Kingdom educational policy, and that included Northern Ireland. There were already second level schools, called 'grammar schools,' largely a middle class preserve. After the Education Act, that situation continued because the newly established schools, including Saint Louise's, were less prestigious and the road to preferment was still the grammar school route.

Sister Genevieve set herself against that. Much of the establishment, civil service, and even the Catholic clergy were products of the grammar schools, and did not understand Genevieve's objection. The Northern Ireland education system had an examination at the

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<sup>4</sup> Rae, *Sister Genevieve*, 10.

end of primary school that decided whether a child could proceed to a grammar school or go to a secondary school. Genevieve opposed the selective system (the Eleven Plus exam, as it was called) on educational grounds, on justice grounds, and on Vincentian grounds. Her opposition caused conflict with priests and religious educators who were supporters of the status quo, and she brought an edge that many priests were unused to experiencing from a nun. Her forthright views on selective grammar schools were a cause of much criticism.

**Challenging Grammar Schools.** The grammar schools, especially the local Catholic girls' grammar school on the Falls Road, were in direct competition to Saint Louise's. But that competition could be overcome. Sister Genevieve imitated grammar school externals at every turn. School uniforms were "an outward and visible sign of inward grace," and the brown blazers, berets, blouses and skirts were an important reminder to the community of what was going on. Ironically, the students became known as "the brown bombers." The girls were continually inspected – like soldiers – to ensure that they presented a smart and well-groomed appearance. Genevieve even took a car on patrol up the Falls to check on them going home. Early on in her regime, she established that uniforms mattered.

Discipline also mattered. Sister Genevieve took pains to stamp her authority on the school. Students from the first decade of the school's existence were in no doubt as to who ran the show. Genevieve projected an aura around the classrooms and corridors that ensured excellent discipline for students, ancillary staff and teachers alike. Discipline led to hard work and real learning; but it was also an important marker for the community. The girls from Saint Louise's were to be taken seriously, as responsible educated young women. The community knew that they were being made "to toe the line."

**Saint Louise's Comprehensive College.** At first, Genevieve opposed the decision in 1968 to double the size of Saint Louise's. She considered that expansion would put all of their discipline and hard work in jeopardy. She was persuaded to change her mind by a number of things: the extra resources that the Ministry promised to make available, and the opportunity to show by example what a truly inclusive school could do for an area like the Falls Road. This last reason was in fact decisive, but she extracted concessions from both Church and State: Saint Louise's would take girls from the Falls, *and* be permitted to recruit outside the immediate area for potential grammar school candidates. She demanded that the school be called



'Comprehensive' and a 'College,' a title not in official use in Northern Ireland, but she had her way. In 1969, Saint Louise's was renamed "Saint Louise's Comprehensive College."

**Parity with Grammar Schools.** The program at Saint Louise's was comprehensive, that is, it treated equally both academic and vocational students. The ideal of the comprehensive school is that each ability band of students would be equally represented in the school population, in practice, difficult to realize because parents, naturally enough, would send their more able children to more prestigious selective grammar or independent schools. To counter this, Genevieve recruited energetically to attract able students. She 'marketed' the school widely, projecting its image (and inevitably her own image) firmly into the public limelight. Predictably, this aroused much resentment, and became the second major source of criticism of her leadership.

Genevieve ensured that the students did not receive a cut-price education: for instance, just like some grammar schools, Saint Louise's became famous for music and musicals. She encouraged her girls to pursue academic subjects whenever she judged that they could. By 1980, 20% to 25% of the senior students were in the academic band, and 75% of the cohort finished the sixth form.

**The IRA and British Forces.** There is no need to recount the political events during these decades, except to say that the Falls was the front line in a guerrilla war. Twenty fathers of students at Saint Louise's died violently between 1958 and 1987. Students and teachers had to negotiate a road as dangerous as any in the world, on which heavily armed soldiers, shootings, explosions, check points, searches, riots, civil disturbance on a grand scale and fire fights were familiar. On one side were Republican supporters and participants, on the other side, the British Army and security forces. Genevieve steered the ship of her school between these two hazards. She contrived to preserve her school, its grounds and its buildings, from interference and intimidation from both.

She was against violence, and that pitted her against the Republicans. Some parents and community residents questioned whether she was nationalist enough. She opposed any involvement with the paramilitaries, especially on the part of her students. Some did join, a handful imprisoned, and two former students killed on active service. But in general, she managed to persuade her students to steer clear of paramilitary involvement.

Genevieve was always concerned with the safety of her pupils. Often checkpoints blocked their way, manned by edgy and unpredictable young soldiers. Genevieve, on occasion, assembled a column of girls going home from school, and then, in full nun's regalia, led her procession through the barricade by force of personality.

Intimidation was always a concern in a Republican area. Sinn Fein/I.R.A. ruled the Falls, enforcing closures of shops and schools for Republican funerals or protests. Genevieve ignored them. Whatever was happening on the streets, the school was open for business, and the pupils and teachers were expected to be doing their job. This led to heated meetings, but Genevieve stood firm. Even her sternest critics will credit Genevieve with maintaining a normal educational atmosphere inside the school through the worst of the Troubles. This was not unique, for many schools – Catholic and Protestant – were centers of peace and tranquillity in a troubled time, but few were doing this at the very eye of the storm.

**Mary O'Farrell, O.B.E.** Republicans criticized Genevieve for being too close to the British establishment. She certainly knew the key players in education, especially the ministers in the Northern Ireland Office responsible for schools. Some shared her dislike of the selective system and made common cause with this nun in the inner city. The queen honored Sister Genevieve (under her own name of Mary O'Farrell) with the Order of the British Empire in 1987 at Buckingham Palace. Republican Belfast was not impressed. She had taken the queen's shilling. When she undertook two Government-sponsored speaking tours of the United States, republicans accused her of 'selling out,' or at least, of being naively used by the British Government. Genevieve's stance led to the third major source of criticism against her. Her critics regarded the award and the high profile she adopted as self-promotion; but she said simply that they were necessary for the good of the school and the students.

### *3. Leadership Ad Intra*

In this section, we consider the leadership style Genevieve exhibited internally to the school. While Saint Louise's was a comparatively small institution, she was able to personally bring her influence to bear on class, corridor, and common room. Expansion however posed a challenge to her 'hands-on' style.

**New Structures.** Genevieve was well aware of the difficulty, and had opposed the doubling of the school in size, judging that a

very large school would militate against the educational outcomes that the school was beginning to accomplish. Then she was persuaded to acquiesce in the decision to enlarge the school, "...gambling that she would be able to run an efficient administration while retaining her personal influence over her girls."<sup>5</sup>

Up to 1969, Sister Gen had put her personal stamp on the school. In these new circumstances, her response was to change her methods by becoming more of a manager, while still retaining the reins of leadership. She established an Administration Team consisting of herself, the deputy principals and five other colleagues. Working parties were responsible for particular parts of the school administration. Each had a formal agenda, met weekly and reported to the administration in formal minutes because "communication cannot be left to chance as it so often was in the past." We know of Genevieve's ideas because she described her re-organization to student teachers in a talk in 1983.

Of course, nothing in her system was original. She copied best practice in U.K. schools. She combined delegation and consultation with frequent staff meetings, pupil assemblies and corridor 'walkabouts.' What made the difference between Saint Louise's and some other large comprehensive schools was the systematic tenacity that Genevieve brought to its operation.

**Simple Message.** For the students, there was a simple message: "You're as good as anybody else." This theme was dinned in at assemblies, constantly stressed as the motive for excellence, and changed with the situation. "This isn't a second class school for second class people." "Shoulders back. Heads up. Be proud of your school." "Don't think those people wearing red uniforms down the Road are any better than you." The Road was the Falls Road. The red uniformed school was the opposition grammar school. The message was clear.

With expansion, Genevieve began to depend on the sixth form girls and the prefects to convey the spirit of the school. She undertook to train them for leadership themselves. But her elite was not to be an academic elite; the ideal in this school was service. "There is no better way for developing character than to get involved with others, to feel responsible for someone less fortunate than yourself."

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Genevieve always took pains to recruit from the original two parishes that the school had served. She certainly spread her net far and wide in an effort to attract bright students, but fully two-thirds of the girls in the eighties were daughters of former pupils. John Rae notes that this is a far higher proportion of children of pupils than in the public schools of England. Genevieve had a 'selective' school, but the elite came from the Lower Falls. This ensured that the pupils themselves transmitted the ethos of the school – its upward mobility, inner city reality, high expectations, community pride and religious motivation.

**Religious Spirit.** "Religion is about the transmission of values," said Sister Genevieve, "and therefore, religion is the cornerstone of a school. Education is definitely not a question of examination results and career success, there is an important and central place for values and spirituality." The characteristic spirit of Saint Louise's was based on an explicitly Vincentian and Christian mission. Sister Genevieve expressed this as "Respect for the Individual," above all, respect for "the least of these." This principle was spelled out in school assembly homilies as respect for anyone, Irish, English, Protestant or Catholic. It involved particularly the Christian duty of forgiveness, and she cited especially the plight of interned paramilitaries, with names like Niall and David. They were young men who had no chance to make something of their lives in West Belfast no matter which side they were on. She returned again and again to Christ's parable of the talents, and in particular, his criterion of success: "Trade till I come." She put the words and ideas together in 'Slogans' – educational sound-bites: "Think before you act," "Don't ever be part of a mob," "Have the courage to say 'No'" and "Get out and change the world, and remember you can do it."

Religious commitment and leadership were inseparable. It involved caring for others, making tough demands on oneself with an undertaking to achieve equality of opportunity and esteem for everyone. No group in the school exemplified this more than the Marillacs, a society named after Saint Louise de Marillac, patron of the school and founder of the Daughters of Charity. "The spirit of the Marillacs is one of joyful charity, of being always willing to serve, of undertaking happily, humble, even unpleasant tasks for the old people." Genevieve instructed them, and she had story after story of what happened when the girls did that. Service was organized around Marillac membership, as well as three Marian sodalities (Children of

Mary, the Aspirants, and the Holy Angels corresponding to the seniors, the middle years, and the juniors). The Marian girls had distinctively colored blue and green neck ribbons with the Miraculous Medal attached, a public sign of service and commitment for the rest of the school. Genevieve used the words 'character' and 'leadership' to carry this message. Service, commitment and idealism was celebrated in the variety of religious holy days, devotions, assemblies and ceremonies which dotted the school calendar in the course of which the message was driven home.

"Revolutions do not generally emanate from the middle classes, but from the frustrated unemployed," Sister Genevieve analyzed later. Examinations were important, but for all students, not just for the high flyers. Students were entered for as many public examinations as they could handle. The objective was clear: each student must achieve to the best of her ability. When the educational authorities barred the school from running academic tests (as unsuitable for an intermediate secondary school) Genevieve enrolled the girls privately, providing the entry fees herself. When they similarly excluded the school from the Junior Commercial Certificate (not a commercial college), she looked for London agencies to accredit the program. On these matters, like Lydia, the dealer in purple whom Saint Paul encountered, "she would not take 'No' for an answer."

Genevieve herself, as they say, worked "all the hours God made." She demanded equal commitment from her staff. She communicated the idea that Saint Louise's was a place on the move. If a teacher was up to it, Genevieve supported her to the hilt. If she detected reluctance or lack of enthusiasm or laziness, she was ruthless. 'Ruthless' is the word most commonly used of Genevieve. John Rae glosses it as "exceptionally single minded," not "pitiless." She commented briefly on this herself in a talk to student-teachers: "A head of department must at all times be conscious that the children may suffer if she fails to meet her responsibilities, and this may call for 'a touch of ruthlessness.' She cannot remain 'one of the girls.'" The quotation marks were hers.

#### 4. Formation

Encouraging leadership was what Sister Genevieve said she was about. What was the education that made her a leader? Born in County Offaly in 1921, she attended the Mercy Convent School

in Tullamore and then, at 18, entered the Daughters of Charity novitiate.

**Preparation.** On the surface, her formation was the same as that of any other Irish Daughter of Charity. The elements were the vocational choice to enter, a spiritual year in the Seminary, a simple and systematic prayer life, energetic and tough physical discipline, close supervision and screening by superiors, probationary assignment, professional training, and a mentoring relationship with older and experienced sisters. Mary O'Farrell entered the congregation in 1941. She became a sister with the name of Genevieve in February 1942, received her habit in spring of 1943, and was sent to Manchester to gain teaching experience. She then entered The Victoria University of Manchester in 1944 to study toward a degree in French and History. Her teaching certificate was earned from Sedgely Park College, Manchester. She taught at Mill Hill Orphanage, London, and from 1950, in Saint Mary's, Lanark, Scotland. There was question of Genevieve becoming a teacher in a Dundee secondary school, but the authorities decided otherwise. In 1956 she was sent to Saint Vincent's School, Belfast, where our story began.

This sounds very conventional. But there were two distinctive features in the story of Genevieve's formation.

**The Will of God.** The first distinctive element in Genevieve's formation is her vocation. "The Will of God," in the lives of many, seems to be a function of vision or talent. In other words, their natural dispositions incline them in the directions that God wants them to go. God almost seems to tell them to do what they would have wanted to do anyway. Genevieve, however, was fascinated by the opposite predicament – when God calls someone to go *against* natural inclination. She cited, on several occasions, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, which she noted had a happy ending in the Bible, but sometimes, a not so happy ending in real life. This fascination is, I think, a clue to her personal vocation story.

Initially, she did not want to be a nun nor a teacher. We know this from an open and frank article she wrote for the *Furrow* magazine in 1990.<sup>6</sup> She described her vocation as "something that still baffles me." She had already decided against following a vocation with the sisters from her own Convent Secondary School at Tullamore (even

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<sup>6</sup> Genevieve O'Farrell, "Something Enjoyable and Important...", *The Furrow* (Maynooth: November, 1990), 625–631.



Sister Genevieve O'Farrell, D.C., of the Ireland Province. 1983.

*Courtesy of the author*

though they had actively recruited her), because she hated teaching. But God spoke to her through Anna Daly, a classmate at secondary school, during a casual conversation at school about vocations. Anna had a brother with Downs-Syndrome in the Daughters of Charity hospital at Cabra in Dublin. After a family visit she remarked: "Those French Sisters really do serve the poor." That comment stuck in Mary O'Farrell's mind. She knew very little about the Daughters of Charity, but despite the opposition of her family, and the advice of a Jesuit priest (who considered the order too tough) she entered, as she confessed later, half hoping to be sent home. The seminary life was a penance; she described it as dehumanizing, tough, and unrelenting. But she caught the passion for service of the poor. Though she had hated the idea of teaching, she would later accept such an assignment as it was to be teaching the poor.

**Life Crisis.** There is a second distinctive element in Genevieve's formation that may be a surprise to many. She failed her degree at Manchester University.

John Rae proposed several explanations for her failure: lack of educational background, a failure in application to study, or the reluctance to enter a teaching career. None of them is probable. The authorities intervened and arranged an extra year in a training college for her to gain a teaching qualification. She faced failure, both in academics and in life. Did that student failure, reassessment and late conversion to teaching have anything to do with the woman who came to Belfast and had such an effect on Catholic education in Northern Ireland? Did the suffering, confusion and uncertainty of her formation in youth provide the foundation for the power and commitment of the educational leader we meet on the Falls Road two decades later?

### 5. Lessons

There are many theories of leadership. Some look to the natural traits of the individual, claiming that "Leaders are born, not made." Other theories look the leader's behaviors and skills, affirming that "Every one can be a leader." Still more study the situations in which leadership is exercised, with the slogan: "Come the hour, come the man" \*(person). Recent ideas view leadership as transforming people, concerned with the personal as well as the organizational, the internal as well as the external, the spiritual and emotional as well as the effective and efficient, the leader as well as the led. These writers consider the personal aspect as crucial to leadership. Greenleaf's 'servant leadership' is an example, as is Kouzes and Posner's 'shared vision' and Bolman and Deal's 'leading with soul.'<sup>7</sup> Hence, it is interesting to reflect on the career of one who was both effective and efficient, who possessed a clearly articulated philosophy of leadership, who submitted to a thorough formation, and who is generally recognized as a visionary leader.

**Learning to Lead.** How does one learn to lead? Leadership formation is certainly personal. Gregory Bateson's *Categories of Learning (Theory of Logical Types)* provides a useful model for

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<sup>7</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); Lee G. Bolman and Terence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).



people-centered or personal approaches to education.<sup>8</sup> Bateson was interested in the differences between the learning of a machine, of an animal and of a human. The first of the Categories is 'Zero Learning:' this amounts to instinctive, mechanical behavior, thoughtless action, involving no choice and no challenge. Education at this level is mere imitation and habituation. 'Learning One' involves problem solving, learning to choose from a single set of clear options. Education at this level consists of didactic methods, information-transfer and conditioning. 'Learning Two' involves learning to choose from many sets of options, including experience of trial and error. Education at this level comprises experiential methods, action research and reflective practice. 'Learning Three' places even the self in question: no longer does an independent self choose from external strategies and discrete actions; now the self might have to change itself, matching its identity, purpose and action to reality. Bateson says that the level of 'Learning Three' "occurs from time to time in psychotherapy, religious conversions, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganization of character."<sup>9</sup> He further suggests that progress takes place on the developmental ladder when one is forced off one rung to ascend to the higher by a contradiction to one's previously learned convictions. In other words, learners must risk what they know to learn something new. Furthermore, it is only when learners place their own character and disposition in question that they can progress to the third level of learning, and be capable of confronting severe challenges, withstanding serious crises and achieving high goals.

An illustration suggests itself to explain the Levels of Learning. Were one to propose learning how to go to California, 'Zero Learning' would involve following someone there who knows the way, and retaining, remembering, or reducing to habit the turns and maneuvers necessary to accomplish the journey. 'Learning One' would mean studying maps and timetables to digest the implications of different routes, assessing the advantages of each option, before applying one's own choice. 'Learning Two' would incorporate the experience of trial and error, including the possibility that one might decide to remain in

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<sup>8</sup> Kerry Cochrane, Jock Fletcher and Pat Bradbery, "Spirituality and the Learning Organisation," Paper to the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, Woolangong, Australia, 1996. Unpublished.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1972), 301.

Saint Louis and not bother to complete the journey. 'Learning Three,' however, opens the possibility of the individual changing more than his or her physical location. The traveler could become a miner (like the 49ers who followed the Gold Rush to California) or a hippie (like a 1960s dropout heading for San Francisco) or a swallow (like those returning annually to the mission church at Capistrano on the feast of St. Joseph)! This level of education is truly Transformational, the level appropriate for learning leadership.

**Content of Leadership Learning.** Dennis Mussig suggests possible content for this kind of personal formation (which he calls Value-Driven Leadership Training). He draws his theory and research on Spiritual and Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is made up of Personal Competence: including self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation, and Social Competencies: including Empathy and Social Skills. Spiritual Intelligence, according to Mussig, is concerned with seven facets:

- 1) Capacity to be flexible.
- 2) High degree of self-awareness.
- 3) Capacity to face and use suffering.
- 4) The quality of being inspired by vision and values.
- 5) A tendency to see connections between diverse things (Holistic).
- 6) A marked tendency to ask "Why?" or "What if?" questions to seek fundamental answers.
- 7) Being what psychologists call "field-independent" – possessing a facility for working against convention.<sup>10</sup>

Mussig identifies the common ground between his content and Kouzes and Posner's Credibility model<sup>11</sup> as Honesty, Sustainability, Commitment and Understanding. Central to the concept of Honesty, he suggests, is a "high level self-assessment and self-regulation by facing our own emotions and failings and using the knowledge to create better relationships."<sup>12</sup> More work needs to be done on the

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<sup>10</sup> Dennis J. Mussig, "A Research and Skills Training Framework for Values-Driven Leadership," Paper to the Irish Management Institute, Waterford, Ireland, 2002. Unpublished paper.

<sup>11</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

<sup>12</sup> Mussig, "Skills Training Framework," 4.

content of Leadership Formation. It is already clear, however, that serious attention to followers, their individual dispositions, talents, motivations and situations, as well as dealing with the leader's own qualities, especially his or her limitations and failures, is necessary for developing leadership ability.

**Life and Leadership Crises.** Anna Neumann, in the process of researching the life stories of academic women, remarks how closely their lives and stories are entwined. She finds that "professors tell stories of themselves and their lives through the medium of their work, notably through their scholarship, and that their scholarship often stands as a statement of personal identity."<sup>13</sup> The same applies to other careers. It is an interesting perspective with which to view the life of Sister Genevieve, discerning her personal life-story in the untold story of a career, discovering the place of suffering and failure lying behind enormous achievement, and realizing that the "silence may bear the story."<sup>14</sup>

It is remarkable how often suffering and failure figures in stories of leaders. Richard Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski have investigated how crisis experiences and personal disasters have affected the professional and personal lives of educational leaders.<sup>15</sup> They describe a crisis experience as an event that wounds "a person's essential being... integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit."<sup>16</sup> In their research they seek to reach the "story within the story" in leadership. They emerge with three lessons from their research:

- 1) Learn to trust the unattended areas of your leadership – especially your feelings.
- 2) Listen honestly and deeply for questions that are feared or left out of your work life altogether.
- 3) Find folks to talk to whom you really trust.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Neumann, "Ways without words: Learning from silence and story in post-holocaust lives," in Anna Neumann and Penelope L. Peterson, *Learning from Our Lives: Women, Research and Autobiography in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Richard H. Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski, *The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Leadership is not a skill exercised only externally. A leader is so vulnerable that the person and spirit and soul of the leader must become deeply involved. How the leader deals with the internal, as well as the external struggle will define success. Leaders lead, that is, they go in front, they put themselves on the line, they stand on their own sandals. They must be prepared for that place.

**Capacity to Suffer.** A Vincentian leader is not just any leader with a social conscience. There is motivation to serve the poor, indeed, but there is also a more personal, spiritual, and interior (one hesitates to say 'religious') quality to following Christ in the manner of Vincent and Louise. Perhaps it can be seen in the encounter with suffering. Vincent's spirituality is Christocentric, discerning the face of Christ in the suffering poor, and aligning one's own suffering, puny though it be, with Christ on the cross. Dennis Mussig speaks of "capacity to face and use suffering" as a quality of Spiritual Intelligence, and Christian understanding can be nothing less than a powerful aid to do just that. Sister Genevieve remarked that she could not have survived the pressures of her position of leadership without her daily prayer, Mass, and the support of her local community of Daughters of Charity. Richard Ackerman, for one, will agree with her.

The lesson for developing Vincentian leadership is less easy to articulate. For three hundred years, Vincentian leaders were formed in permanent communities that could call on the total life commitment of members. Sister Genevieve, and her sisters in the Daughters of Charity, were deployed in obedience to their superiors, with little consultation, and allowance for personal preferences. This was not unusual; it was true for all religious orders up to the Second Vatican Council. It made, in many cases, for pain and frustration, waste of talent, inefficiency in using resources and ineffectiveness in mission. But it also provided an invaluable ascetical training in single-minded and deep commitment.

When lay people become the carriers of Vincentian ideals, and Vincentian leadership passes from religious to lay people, it is difficult to see how the same formation can be employed without a permanent community and a life commitment. Certain elements, including a sense of the will of God, an attention to personal spiritual growth, prayer life, community support, a mentoring role, and an appreciation of failure, suffering and sin in Christian life, must somehow be factored into the formation process. The way of achieving this is not easy to see, but radical service of the poor, serious immersion in poverty and

substantial time-commitment should supply some structure for lay Vincentian formation.

### *Conclusion*

Leadership theory and idealist leadership in particular, needs the grounding of actual experience to specify, illustrate and delineate what theory might prescribe. Equally, practice needs theory to provide structure and understanding. Garrett Fitzgerald's plea rings true. "How does it work in theory?"

Our case study suggests certain themes: opposition, contradiction, determination, community, spirituality, personal suffering and failure. Rather than settle for a view of Vincentian leadership that is an amalgam of management techniques and social awareness, this has been an attempt to tease out the Christian features of a very personal struggle for meaning.

Leadership is concerned with innovation. The leader is the one who strikes out in new directions. Leadership relates to fresh missions, creative enterprises, novel approaches. At times of particular difficulty, we need a leader to chart a new course and to keep a steady hand on the tiller. It is important in crisis to retain the confidence of followers, and so leadership relates also to motivation.

Motivation has two aspects: the reason why people do things, and the intensity with which they do them. "Why?" complements "How much?" A leader has to persuade followers why a course of action is being decided, how important an outcome may be, and what its significance is in the great scheme of things. The leader needs to know how much people are prepared to pay, which sacrifice can be demanded, what suffering can be borne. This calls on a leader's grasp of ultimate meaning, force of communication, and credibility. Leaders who can successfully deploy these powerful elements are happy indeed. Such leaders might even convince themselves. Sister Genevieve obviously did.