



Mother Mary Vincent Whitty rsm

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BISHOP QUINN AND THE EARLY SISTERS OF MERCY

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If one were to ask many Brisbane Catholics today what they know about Bishop James Quinn, one might be forgiven for thinking that he has something in common with Julius Caesar: The evil that men do lives after them...Now, I don't think Bishop Quinn was evil, but it seems very sad that someone who gave twenty years of his life to building the Church in Queensland, and who in that time did many very good things, should be remembered principally for things generally regarded as bad. If one examines his relationship with the Sisters of Mercy, it would be fair to say that although it was not all bad, it certainly brings to light some of his less attractive attributes and decisions.

We begin with James Quinn himself, and with the person usually connected with him in his dealings with the Sisters of Mercy— Mother Mary Vincent Whitty. When I began to prepare this paper, I was struck by how much their early lives had in common: They were born a few weeks apart in 1819, into reasonably comfortable rural Irish families, he in Kildare and she in Wexford; they were both educated at private schools in Dublin around the same time; they belonged to families which each gave several members to service in the Church: three of the four Quinn brothers became priests, two Whitty girls joined the Sisters of Mercy, one brother became a diocesan priest, then a Jesuit, and another died while a seminarian in Rome. James Quinn enrolled at the Irish College in Rome in 1836 and Ellen Whitty entered the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1839.

Despite the similarities in their early lives, it is doubtful if James Quinn and Ellen Whitty ever met until probably the early 1850s. Quinn was to spend twelve years in Rome, during which time, as well as receiving priestly ordination, he earned a double doctorate, in philosophy and theology. He was on his way to a third doctorate (in canon law), when he was recalled to Dublin in 1848 by Archbishop Murray, and given responsibility for establishing a secondary school for boys in Harcourt Street. This was not all that far from the Baggot Street convent where Ellen Whitty, then known as SM Vincent, had completed her novitiate and teacher training, and had successively held the positions of Bursar and Mistress of Novices. In 1849, she was elected Reverend Mother of the Baggot Street convent and sometime in the 1850s Father James Quinn became chaplain and confessor to the community there. Although they were probably never close friends, there is a deal of evidence to show that Mother Vincent had a high regard for Quinn and relied on his counsel. Likewise, he saw her as a wise administrator and community leader, and supported her in various ways.

So, when Quinn received news of his appointment as Bishop of Brisbane in 1859, it was natural that he should seek a community of Sisters of Mercy to accompany him to his distant mission. By then, Mother Vincent was no longer Reverend Mother, and, having frequently expressed the desire to go on a foreign mission, she was the first to volunteer for Brisbane. However, the then Reverend Mother decided that no Sisters could be spared to Dr Quinn, least of all MM Vincent, who was considered too valuable to be sent on a mission to the other side of the world. When his entreaties to the Rev Mother failed, Quinn appealed to Dublin Archbishop Paul Cullen, and on 28 November 1860, only a few days before Bishop Quinn was to sail for Australia, Cullen had a handwritten note delivered to Baggot Street. It read in part:

If Mrs Whitty be willing to go, I am perfectly satisfied that she should go, and as she has so much experience I think she would secure the success of the mission. You must settle this matter all at once. If Mrs Whitty go, you must allow one or two novices or others whom you can spare to accompany her¹.

The Archbishop had spoken, the community capitulated, and Mother Vincent had only a few days to pack her bags and depart for Liverpool, the port from which the *Donald Mackay* was to sail for Australia on 8 December 1860. The Bishop had got his woman, and it seemed like a marriage made in Heaven!

There were five other Sisters who comprised the Brisbane foundation, and I want to say a little about four of them, as they were important in the story of the unfolding relationship with the Bishop:

SM Benedict McDermott — was a young Sister, recently professed in Baggot Street; someone, who, had the circumstances been different, would probably have lived a useful but unremarkable life as a member of the Brisbane Congregation;

SM Cecilia McAuliffe — was still a novice when she left Baggot Street. Although musical and possessed of a fine singing voice, she was never very strong, and her health, along with that of SM Benedict, was a constant worry to M Vincent.

SM Catherine Morgan — was a member of the Mercy Congregation in Liverpool. She was a last minute addition to the Brisbane group, joining them hours before the *Donald Mackay* sailed.

Postulant Emily Conlan (later SM Bridget) — was recruited for Brisbane by Quinn himself. They knew each other well, as he had been her spiritual director for some years, and she shared his ideas about religious life. She was to become Reverend Mother in Brisbane in 1869, a position she held for ten years.

They were a motley group to be going on a foundation to the other side of the world, but Mother Vincent was an experienced leader with an unbounded faith that God could surmount any obstacles placed in their way.

The relationship between the Bishop and the Reverend Mother began positively, although MM Vincent had misgivings about his decision to give the novice's veil to his protégée, Emily Conlan, after only a few days on board ship. He was very solicitous for the comfort and safety of the Sisters, and after arriving in Brisbane, even gave up his own house to them until more suitable accommodation could be found. A few weeks after their arrival, Mother Vincent wrote back to Baggot Street:

My respect for our good Bishop increases the more I know him—he is so thoroughly good².

The Bishop took his responsibility for the Sisters extremely seriously, and was very rigid in what he would permit them to do, but Mother Vincent wrote in 1863:

I think he is quite right, and we shall yet feel the great benefit of his strictness in these matters³.

The catalyst for the Bishop's increasing strictness was the departure of SM Catherine Morgan in September 1862. She had been educated by the Benedictine Sisters at Stanbrook Abbey, and had spent thirteen years as a professed member of the well-established and well-ordered Mercy Congregation in Liverpool before volunteering for Brisbane. Despite her missionary longings, she was unable to cope with the raw conditions of life in Brisbane. She was probably emotionally unstable and suffering from what anthropologists term culture shock, but she blamed Mother Vincent for her problems, citing a lack of order and discipline in the convent. The Bishop used Catherine's departure as an excuse to step up his vigilance of Mother Vincent's exercise of authority.

It is hard to believe that such an experienced Superior would be derelict in her duties. However, Mother Vincent would have known that the norms of religious discipline and order suited to an established group in a stable society such as Dublin or Liverpool, could not be rigidly applied in a fledgling community in colonial Australia. In their cramped little cottage next to the Cathedral, there were no convent walls to protect them from the milling crowds in the yard. As well, there were the many calls on their time, and the pressures of teaching and visitation of the poor and sick. Under such conditions, it would have been impossible to follow a strict horarium and to have settled times for community duties. In relaxing the rules somewhat, Mother Vincent would have seen herself following the advice of Catherine McAuley, one of whose maxims was:

Be careful never to make too many laws, for if you draw the string too tight it will break ⁴.

Mother Vincent wore her authority lightly. Like Catherine McAuley before her, she led by example rather than by precept, and there is evidence, both from her Baggot Street days and later in life, of her democratic approach to superiorship. Although she could exercise discipline when she needed to, strength of presence rather than autocratic control was her usual *modus operandi* in matters of governance.

The Bishop, on the other hand, believed that a Superior should be very strict in the application of rules and regulations, and should be exacting in ensuring fidelity to the slightest detail, regardless of the circumstances. It was a principle that Quinn applied to his life as Bishop, and there are copious examples of where this way of acting led him into conflict with those who, like Mother Vincent, could have been his staunch supporters.

There is no evidence that Mother Vincent deliberately opposed Quinn in any way. Even where there was a principle at stake, as, for example, in the education debate, she eventually complied with his wish to

connect her schools to the Board of Education. She also acceded to his requests to hand over to him the Sisters' land orders, to make new foundations branch houses rather than autonomous groups, and to set aside the Sisters' salaries for the eventual employment of lay teachers. Even when he purchased a new house for the community and handed Mother Mary Vincent the bill for £6,000 then forbade her to do any fundraising, she did not protest. But she felt exasperated by his continual interference in community affairs, and this is evident from one of her letters to Baggot Street :

I think it is his way never to be satisfied with Superiors and their doings.

Although she added philosophically –

but the best plan is to go on and not mind anyone's sayings⁵.

To interfere in the minutiae of convent life was one thing, but the whole saga took a more serious turn when towards the end of 1862, the Bishop appointed himself as sole confessor to the community. Not only was this against the Rule of the Sisters of Mercy, but against the spirit of the Council of Trent which sought to protect the conscience of the individual in such matters. SM Cecilia protested, but to no avail — the Bishop directed MM Vincent to command SM Cecilia to make her confession to him. MM Vincent must have felt torn between her duty to obey the Bishop in all matters and her concern for the rights of an individual sister. There is no record of how this matter was resolved, but for the duration of the Bishop's edict, it must have been a most traumatic time for the community.

Mother Vincent had appealed in vain to Baggot Street for more Sisters, but her pleas had gone largely unheeded. So it was decided that she should return to Ireland in the hope of recruiting the numbers desperately needed to expand the Queensland Catholic school system. In her absence, the Bishop appointed SM Benedict as Superior and SM Cecilia as her Assistant. Leaving Brisbane on 2 January 1865, Mother

Vincent and her companion went first to Sydney and then to Hobart from where they were to sail to London with Bishop Willson. However, they had barely reached Hobart when Quinn sent Father Robert Dunne to fetch them back. Sisters Benedict and Cecilia could not cope with Quinn's interference and, in desperation, had stolen off to Sydney to consult with Archbishop Polding. When Quinn discovered this, his ire was directed, not at Benedict and Cecilia, but at Mother Vincent—for her supposed lack of discipline.

As a result of this, the axe fell, and an entry in the Chapter Book of the Brisbane Congregation reads:

11 March 1865

Removal from office of Rev Mother Vincent Whitty by His Lordship the Most Rev Dr Quinn assisted by the Very Rev Robert Dunne and her right of Voice in Chapter withdrawn for 12 months.⁶

Mother Vincent's reaction to this turn of events is not recorded, but some months later, the Bishop wrote to his brother in Ireland:

The discipline of the house is now in thorough good order, and all are most intent on their business...Sister M. Vincent Whitty is in the best dispositions. Her removal from office was conducive to her spiritual and temporal welfare, and also to the spiritual and temporal welfare of the community.⁷

In Mother Vincent's place Quinn appointed SM Benedict, with SM Bridget her Assistant and Mistress of Novices. SM Cecilia was to be Bursar. To ensure that he could actually control the affairs of the community, he sent SM Benedict to Ipswich and appointed SM Bridget in charge of All Hallows' Convent in Brisbane. He told SM Benedict she could come to All Hallows' once a month to transact the business of the Congregation. However, when she got there, she usually found that the Bishop and SM Bridget had settled matters and she was powerless to change anything. So SM Benedict was superior in name only and the Bishop was actually ruling the community through SM Bridget. When

SM Benedict tried to remonstrate with Quinn about his highhandedness, she was told that under him, 'she was as much a Reverend Mother as anyone would ever be'.⁸ Mother Vincent, deprived of her office, and forbidden to speak at the community Chapter, could do little to help her beleaguered successor. It is a measure of the greatness of the woman, I believe, that she calmly accepted her demotion and did not turn her back on Brisbane and James Quinn, although she must have felt deep concern for Sisters Benedict and Cecilia.

By 1868, Sisters Benedict and Cecilia were at breaking point and again decided on flight, only this time they were determined to leave Brisbane permanently and return to Ireland. Again, Quinn sent Robert Dunne to Sydney to persuade them to come back, saying that if they returned to Brisbane, they could then leave freely if they still chose to do so. However, he had no intention of allowing this to happen, and once they came back, put all sorts of obstacles in their way. Mother Vincent was once again blamed for the departure of the sisters, as Quinn bluntly wrote to Cardinal Cullen of Dublin:

Mrs Whitty's training is the cause of the irregularity committed by these two excellent young Sisters. They have the most generous natural dispositions but no practical idea of religious life. Mrs Whitty is utterly unfit to train or guide others...and...should not have been in office for years before she left Baggot Street.⁹

This is an interesting statement, given Quinn's efforts in 1860 to secure Mother Vincent for his mission! SM Cecilia, never very strong, broke under the strain, and died of dysentery in December 1868. Mother Vincent later testified that she had been fully reconciled with the Bishop before she died.¹⁰

In 1869, MM Benedict's three year term of office was up, and elections were held at All Hallows' Convent. For reasons too complicated to detail here, it was an election in name only, and SM Bridget became Reverend Mother, a position she was to hold for the next ten years. James Quinn at last had a Superior whose attitude to authority

matched his, and through her he obtained the degree of submission and discipline he expected in a religious community. I am not suggesting that Bridget Conlan was a sycophant or a mere puppet of the Bishop. It was just that her ideas on authority and obedience co-incided exactly with his, and she went along willingly with what he wanted. Although MM Benedict was elected as Assistant, she resigned from this office after a couple of months, and, broken both physically and in spirit, left the Congregation in 1870. Although he would never have admitted it, James Quinn must hold at least some responsibility for her departure.

Of course, rumours about the Bishop's behaviour and events in the Brisbane Congregation reached Dublin, and when MM Vincent visited her homeland in 1871, she vigorously defended him. Quinn was very grateful for her loyalty, and by way of reward, if not by way of apology, he appointed her Mother Assistant. On 17 January 1872, he wrote from Dublin to Mother Bridget Conlan in Brisbane:

[SM Vincent] has acted admirably during her time here at home. All her ability and zeal have been thrown into the work, and she has defended Brisbane with all her might. I think it would be well to give her the title of Mother Assistant during her sojourn...here in Europe. I will authorize her to take it, assuming your consent, and you may if you please, send your consent explicitly to her on receipt of this.¹¹

He had obviously forgotten that he had already appointed SM Rose Flanagan as Mother Assistant in 1869! However, elections were held again in mid-1872, and Mother Vincent was duly elected to the position of Assistant, which she held till her death in 1892. She was able to work with Mother Bridget, and to exercise a moderating influence on some of her rather draconian edicts. She was, as Robert Dunne was to say of her later, the 'diamond cement' of the Congregation.

This has been a very summary version of Bishop Quinn's relationship with the Brisbane Congregation during his twenty-year episcopacy. One might well ask whether he had the authority to act as he did, and whether, even if he had the right, he should have exercised it in the way

that he did. It could be argued that Quinn believed he had the authority for at least some of the actions he took regarding the Congregation. The original Rule of the Sisters of Mercy, written by Catherine McAuley herself and subsequently approved by Rome contains the following statement:

This religious congregation of Sisters of Mercy shall be always subject to the authority and jurisdiction of the Diocesan Bishop, and the Sisters shall respect and obey him as their first Superior after the Holy See ...Nothing of importance relating to the House or Community shall be undertaken without the consent of the Bishop.¹²

There was also a provision in Canon Law giving a Bishop more jurisdiction over a religious community until the group numbered seven professed Sisters. Both these statements are open to various interpretations. As they say, the devil is in the detail, but it is highly unlikely that either Catherine McAuley or Canon Law intended them to be interpreted in the way James Quinn understood them. Even presuming that the intention of the law was to give the Bishop the kind of authority he assumed over the Brisbane Congregation, should he have exercised his authority in the way in which he did? However, it must be stated that Quinn's actions were consonant with his exercise of authority in other forums.

As Dr Tom Boland said once in his inimitable way, James Quinn was born to Episcopal purple, and Quinn's understanding of what that meant helps in understanding the man and his actions. He was part of what was probably Ireland's most famous ecclesiastical dynasty. His uncle, Michael Doyle was a prominent Dublin priest, two of his brothers were priests, and one of them was to become Bishop of Bathurst. A cousin, James Murray, was to become Bishop of Maitland and it is thought that the Quinns were also distantly related to Patrick Moran and through him to Cardinal Cullen. Episcopal purple, with a tinge of red, was certainly all around him!

Paul Cullen, as Rector of the Irish College during most of Quinn's time there, is widely regarded as his mentor in matters theological, and certainly his theology of Church seems to have been greatly influenced by Cullen. As his biographer says:

Quinn's view of episcopal authority was Cullen's; and Cullen's was Roman monarchical absolutism.¹³

For Quinn, just as the Pope was the head of the universal church, the Bishop was the absolute ruler of his diocese, and God's representative to his flock. It was out of this firmly held view that he was able to say:

I am a sacred person. I have been ordained and received the Holy Ghost; anyone attacking my character commits a most gross and sacrilegious act.¹⁴

Quinn's view of his Episcopal dignity was combined with a certain arrogance of manner and a world view that coincided with his ecclesiology. He is reported as having told Newman once, when discussing the affairs of the Catholic University,

There must be one head for success in all undertakings.¹⁵

Small wonder, then, that he wanted to subsume the governance of the Sisters of Mercy, under his headship.

Quinn was a complex personality. He could be extremely pastoral and large-minded, but he could also be extremely authoritarian and high-handed. He could brook no opposition to his authority, and he could not allow anyone under him to exercise any degree of freedom or initiative. Furthermore, he either could not or would not see the effects that his decisions had on others. Like his relationships with his clergy and with several prominent laymen of his day, Quinn's relations with the Sisters of Mercy were consonant with the type of person that he was.

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She was the first Director of Mission at the Mater Hospital in Brisbane, and spent several years in various administrative roles in the Brisbane Congregation.

Sr Hetherington has a keen interest in history—especially the early history of the Sisters of Mercy in Brisbane—and is co-editor of “The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty”, a collection of over three hundred letters written by, to or about Mother Vincent, the foundress of the Brisbane Congregation, between 1839 and 1892.

ENDNOTES:

1. Archbishop Paul Cullen to MM of Mercy Norris, 28 November 1860 in Chapter Book of the Brisbane Mercy Congregation (unpublished manuscript), Brisbane Mercy Archives.
2. MM Vincent Whitty to MM of Mercy Norris, 9 June 1861, in Hetherington A & Smoothy P (eds.) *The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty*, UQ Press Brisbane 2011, p 137.
3. MM Vincent Whitty to MM of Mercy Norris, 16 May 1863, in Hetherington & Smoothy, *op cit*, p 155.
4. Limerick Manuscript (Mary Vincent Harnett) in Sullivan MC, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Four Courts Press Dublin 1955, p 179.
5. MM Vincent Whitty to MM of Mercy Norris, 17 February 1864 in Hetherington & Smoothy *op cit*, p 75.
6. Chapter Book of the Brisbane Mercy Congregation (unpublished manuscript), Brisbane Mercy Archives.
7. Bishop James Quinn to Rev Andrew Quinn, July 1865. (Letterbook, Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives).
8. Bishop James Quinn to Rev Robert Dunne, 6 February 1868, (Letterbook , Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives).
9. Bishop James Quinn to Cardinal Paul Cullen, 1 March 1868. (Letterbook, Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives).
10. MM Vincent Whitty to MM Catherine Devereaux, 12 November 1871 in Hetherington & Smoothy *op cit*, p 209.
11. Bishop James Quinn to MM Bridget Conlan, 17 January 1872 in Hetherington & Smoothy *op cit*, pp 220-221.

12. MM Catherine McAuley, *Original Rule of the Sisters of Mercy*, Chapter 12, (Handwritten manuscript 1833), Sisters of Mercy Archives: Dublin.
13. McLay Anne rsm, *James Quinn First Catholic Bishop of Brisbane*, Church Archivists' Society: Toowoomba p 33.
14. Suttor TL, *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia 1877-1870* MUP: Melbourne 1965, p284.
15. McLay, *op cit*, p 23.