The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception: A Canadian Case Study*

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In 1994 the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception [SCIC], once known as the Sisters of Charity of Saint John, commemorated 140 years of service to Roman Catholic communities in Canada, including a quarter century of mission work in Peru. Ironically, thoughts of celebration seem inappropriate at a time when the Sisters of Charity face a decrease in the community’s historical influence within the hospital system of New Brunswick.

For the past few years the sisters have engaged in a highly publicized battle with the provincial government. At the peak of public intensity even the Globe and Mail, usually averse to covering anything from New Brunswick except fish, lumber, mines and the COR party’s views on bilingualism, reported details of the debate: the Province plans to eliminate individual hospital boards. The administration of Catholic hospitals believe the proposal for regional boards will diminish the influence of Roman Catholic religious, effectively eliminating their lengthy control of health services.¹

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In the 1850s when the city of Saint John was reeling under the cholera epidemic even the non-Catholic public in this most rabidly sectarian city praised the health care assistance being provided to orphans by women religious. That, however, was an era in which a person’s religious affiliation revealed not only his or her church but also provided an indication of occupational status, general level of education and wealth, and frequently, the neighbourhood of residence.

Today this stereotyping is no longer easily done even in New Brunswick. Much has changed, particularly during the past three decades. The increased fiscal presence of the government in the fields of social service, health and education has strengthened the policy-making dimension of the secular within sectors once heavily influenced by the apostolic communities. This secularization of institutions, coupled with the increasing numbers of Roman Catholics, and especially Roman Catholic women, acquiring education and position in the secular world and thus, no longer seeking careers within religion as a profession, resulted in the separation of institutional religion from many of the routines of everyday life. Consequently, Roman Catholic religious congregations no longer play the dominant role in Catholic affiliated hospitals.

Moreover, for religious communities this secularization occurred simultaneously with post-Vatican II structural changes affecting their institutes. The Sisters of Charity have not been immune to such upheavals. And so, in the wake of increased government presence and decreasing

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2 New Brunswick Museum, S. Morley Scott Collection, Eliza Donkin, “Reminiscences of Saint John, 1840’s and 1850’s.”

For a consideration of sectarian violence in the province see: Scott W. See, Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

Sectarian antipathy touched most of the collective life of Saint John. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ship Labourers Union split into two factions: the original union composed largely of Roman Catholics and the newly formed Ship Labourers Society (initially known as the Protestant Ship Labourers Society) composed exclusively of Protestants. The split occurred when a number of Protestants contended that work was being assigned by the largely Roman Catholic leadership to their coreligionists. See: Elizabeth W. McGahan, The Port of Saint John, From Confederation to Nationalization, 1867-1927 (Ottawa/ Saint John, 1982), pp. 181, 184. Too, the Saint John school system was uniquely structured with one School Board and two school “systems” – the Roman Catholic schools staffed by the Sisters of Charity and Roman Catholic lay teachers; the Protestant schools staffed, until recently, almost exclusively by Protestants. See: Mary Ann MacMillan, “The ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement’: Towards a Viable Educational System, Saint John, 1871-1971,” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1990).

3 For many references to this phenomenon within the Roman Catholic population see: Mary Kilfoil McDevitt, We Hardly Knew Ye: St. Mary’s Cemetery, An Enduring Presence, Saint John, New Brunswick (Fredericton, N.B.: Saint John Branch of the Irish Canadian Cultural Association, 1990).
religious personnel, the current hospital crisis faced by the Sisters of Charity in its struggle with the province became a metaphor for the challenge faced by the Sisters of Charity in their struggle for survival as a viable women’s apostolic religious community.

Relative to our general knowledge about other aspects of Canadian Roman Catholic church history comparatively little is known about congregations of women religious in English-speaking Canada. This paper considers the foundation, expansion, and stabilization periods of the community’s life cycle – encompassing the years 1854 to 1965.

THE FIRST PERIOD...
1. Foundation and Routinization: 1854-1897

The Sisters of Charity of Saint John was founded in 1854 in response to the demographic impact of the Great Famine upon the port city of Saint John. Observing that many of his newly arrived flock were clustered at the lower end of the economic scale and pressed by the surplus of orphans created by the cholera epidemics of the early 1850s, Bishop Thomas Louis Connolly concluded that an apostolic women’s religious community was

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4 The Official Historical Booklet Diocese of Saint John (Saint John, New Brunswick: Diocesan Holy Name Union, Diocese of Saint John, New Brunswick, 1948) contains only brief references regarding the foundation of the Sisters of Charity on pp. 42 and 44.


6 Patricia Wittberg, S.C., Creating a Future for Religious Life (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991). This study applies the conventional organizational model to the life-cycle of religious communities.
critical to the physical and cultural survival of the diocese.\(^7\) Although he was an Irishman who had volunteered for service in Canada Connolly chose not to invite the services of either an Irish congregation or a French Canadian congregation.\(^8\) Instead, having pastored in Halifax, he sought the assistance of those congregations with whom he had worked while in the Nova Scotian capital. And thus, he contacted the superiors of the Sisters of Charity and the Religious of the Sacred Heart, each of which had their generalates or headquarters in New York City.

Inundated by the demands of a burgeoning Catholic population in New York City, neither superior could provide personnel assistance. When cholera struck Saint John again in the summer of 1854, Connolly personalized his plea by reminding the Religious of the Sacred Heart that while he had been in Halifax he had attended their spiritual and secular needs and now with “seventy orphans on my hands” he needed their support.\(^9\) The Bishop was obviously calling in his “markers.” From the Religious of the Sacred Heart, Connolly secured four sisters to care temporarily for the ever-increasing orphans.

However, the Sisters of Charity, who were facing a continuing crisis in New York with the arrival of poor Irish immigrants, again reiterated their initial objections to further missions in the Maritimes. But Mother Ely did grant Bishop Connolly permission to address the novitiate in the hope of securing volunteers for Saint John. Those who joined him accepted that they would be severing their ties to New York and forming a diocesan-based community in Saint John. Additionally, the Bishop and the New York Charities understood that there would be no further requests coming from the Diocese of Saint John.\(^10\)


\(^8\) The Sisters of the Presentation of the B.V.M., an Irish community, had been established in Newfoundland since 1833. Also the Congregation of Notre Dame (C.N.D.) was well established in Quebec. Bishop Connolly, however, had reservations about bringing the Irish issues to British North America and this may have negated the Presentation Sisters as a possibility for New Brunswick. Also the C.N.D.’s were French-speaking. Too, in the 1850s New York City was more easily accessed from Saint John, N.B. than either Montreal or St. John’s, Newfoundland.


Four volunteers responded to Connolly’s appeal. Among them was Honoria Conway (1815-1892), later to be recognized as foundress of the first indigenous English-speaking women’s congregation in Canada – the Sisters of Charity of Saint John. By late 1854, Bishop Connolly had in place the beginnings of a community pledged to the foundation of the Sisters of Charity of Saint John, and intended to provide a range of services addressing the linguistic, demographic and geographic matrices of the community’s mission field.

On October 21, 1854 the women who came with Connolly to Saint John made their vows as Sisters of Charity of Saint John. They also received the Rules of the community which, although written by Connolly, were intended to reflect the spirit of those followed by the Sisters of Charity of New York. As was the procedure during the early years of diocesan religious congregations, the bishop appointed the superior. Connolly chose Honoria Conway who at once began to serve as Mother General; a few years later she was also named Mistress of Novices.

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11 For a review of Honoria Conway’s life see: M. Genevieve Hennessey, SCIC, Honoria Conway: Woman of Promise (Saint John, N.B.: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, 1985)


When Laus Deo 1854-1954 was published during the community’s centennial celebrations, Bishop Connolly was identified as the community’s founder and Sister Conway as the co-foundress. However, by the early 1980s Sister Conway was being identified as the foundress. See: SCIC Archives, Called to be with Him, Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (Saint John, N.B.: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, 1983), p. 2. At this point, Bishop Connolly was being viewed, and considered, as the community’s ecclesiastical sponsor.

13 Elizabeth W. McGahan, “Honoria Conway,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. xii (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 209. At this time Honoria Conway was possibly a novice as she had spent about one year in New York.

Although the usual term is “Rule” and not “Rules” when Bishop Connolly wrote the first rules of the new community he entitled it: “Rules for the Sisters of Charity, Saint John, New Brunswick ... In the Name of God, Amen.” See: The Archives of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (Hereafter noted as SCIC Archives), Bishop Thomas Louis Connolly, 21 October Anno Domini, 1854.
Mother Honoria Conway, first superior of the Sr. Of Charity of Saint John
Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception Archives.
Sr. Elizabeth Legere Laus Deo 1834-1954
The period of foundation (1854-1897) was characterized by the attendant stresses associated with: (1) the founding of a new religious community; (2) the selection of appropriate locales of service for the sisters; and (3) the specific apostolates open to the Sisters of Charity.

Initially, the small community occupied a temporary house on Cliff Street in Saint John, until the building of their permanent complex on that street in 1865. This housed the resident Mother General, the professed sisters, the novitiate (novices), the postulants, the orphanage, an elementary school and, by 1892, a high school. With all of these functions at the same site, a fairly rigid system of spatial allocation developed to enable the sisters to observe the monastic dimension of their lives. Quarters used by the sisters for eating, sleeping and recreating were off limits to others. Nonetheless some aspects of the community’s rules underwent temporary modifications as the sisters balanced the exercise of their religious duties against the needs of an Irish immigrant population recovering from an epidemic. And so, reflecting the needs of the diocese in the late 1850s, Mother Conway waived the one-year isolation imposed on novices and instead assigned them to assist with the care of the orphans.

The Cliff Street Motherhouse with its many other functions was the busiest house in the community. Modelled somewhat on the physical characteristics of what the founders recalled about the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse in New York, it was easier, however, to pattern the physical structure of the new community after the New York group than it was to re-establish the social structure. Although the Saint John community’s Rule closely followed that of New York, the temporary blending of the functions of Mother General and Mistress of Novices, perhaps, reflected the scale of the new community. In 1865 the community had about thirty-five members. Moreover, although Mother Honoria Conway may have been suited by temperament and skill for the dual task, she was a relatively young religious. In short, in its beginning years the Saint John community did not have as role models a core group of sisters who had passed through an established

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In this regard it may be noted that the Saint John Charities had a very different beginning from the Halifax Charities. In the Halifax case between 1849 and approximately 1865, that community benefitted from the presence of seasoned religious from the New York Charities.
Despite their inexperience as religious, however, members of the new community shared an important variable with the majority of the port city’s Catholic population: ethnicity. The City of Saint John had the largest concentration of Irish Catholics in the province. In fact, the community’s earliest house foundations within the city mirrored the demographic distribution of the Irish, with St. Peter’s convent in the North End (No. 2) and St. Joseph’s Convent on the West Side (No. 3.) becoming bases for the teaching sisters in those areas of the city. Honoria Conway and her successors in the office until 1897 were responsible for establishing the considerable teaching and social services facilities for the Catholic population of the city.

Within the province of New Brunswick during Mother Conway’s term, the congregation expanded along the Saint John River, first in 1857, to Sainte-Basile du Madawaska to establish a school for Catholics in northwestern New Brunswick, and then to Fredericton the following year to open St. Dunstan’s convent. Mother Conway’s period in office ended in 1862. Perhaps the brevity of the founding sister’s generalate was due not only to the strenuous demands of early establishment, but also to an unpleasant and embarrassing incident involving the convent at Sainte-Basile.

In 1861 the sister stationed there with two postulants decided without permission to journey across the province to Bishop Rogers’ Diocese and apparently began to criticize publicly the Sisters of Charity. Very little remains in the records of the incident but it underscored the two principal difficulties of the new community: first, the inexperienced novitiate and undeveloped authority structure within the community; and second, the problem of trying to staff convents several hundred miles apart from the city.

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18 See: Figure 1. Sisters of Charity, Saint John Foundations to 1936. (Data compiled from the SCIC Archives.)
19 *Laus Deo*, pp. 14-35. The terms “house foundations” or “foundations” refer to the convents, schools, hospitals or missions opened by the Sisters of Charity.
20 See: Figure 2. Sisters of Charity, New Brunswick Foundations to 1936. (Data compiled from SCIC Archives.)
21 Most often the term “generalate” refers to the administration of the community, that is, the mother general and the Council. Frequently, it is also used to indicate the term of office that a woman served as mother general. The term was not used in the original rules given to the community by Bishop T.L. Connolly. See: SCIC Archives, Bishop Thomas Louis Connolly, 21 October Anno Domini 1854. “Rules for the Sisters of Charity, Saint John, New Brunswick.”
22 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Vincent Conway [Honoria Conway], Box IA, Folder 105, letter to Bishop Rogers, January 5, 1862. See also: Hennessey, pp. 100-101 and Elizabeth W. McGahan, “Honoria Conway,” p. 209.
Regarding distances from the Mother House see Figure 2. With respect to authority structures, it should be remembered that the Saint John Sisters of Charity did not receive the advice and assistance from an established congregation. See also footnote #17 above.
Mother Conway in a span of twelve years: Mother Francis Routanne, 1862-1865, Mother Mary Augustine O’Ttoole, 1865-1868 and Mother Mary James O’Regan, 1868-1874. It is uncertain whether there was an informal understanding with the then bishop, John Sweeny, concerning the rotation of the chief executive office to give the founding sisters administrative experience. It does appear, however, that the demands of the office were too much for Mother O’Regan, who assumed the office at age thirty-three, stepped down and eventually left the community.

Mother O’Regan was succeeded by Mother Augustine O’Ttoole, who in light of her earlier three-year term, now became the first experienced woman to occupy the office of Mother General. Assuming office in 1874, she was to remain superior of the Sisters of Charity until 1897. Oral tradition within the community, recorded in the 1950s, characterized Mother O’Ttoole “as a far-seeing and capable business woman.” Mary O’Ttoole had emigrated from Carlow, Ireland to New York City where she entered the Sisters of Charity. Ill-health had forced her to leave the novitiate. After recuperating, she planned to reapply to the New York community but she discovered the new congregation in Saint John. She and her sister Bridget journeyed by coastal vessel to Saint John; and became-the community’s first postulants in 1855.

During her twenty-three year generalate, Mother O’Ttoole not only managed the existing operations inherited in 1874, but presided over the founding of St. Patrick’s Industrial Home in 1880. By that year, there was sufficient need within the Catholic community to operate such a facility for homeless Catholic boys. Mother O’Ttoole was also the guiding force behind the opening of the first nursing home in the city of Saint John in 1888 – an undertaking which undoubtedly reflected the tremendous late nineteenth-century out-migration of the young from the Maritimes and the resultant desertion of the displaced elderly.

Mother O’Ttoole's skills must have been thoroughly tested by the ethnic duality of her adopted province and religious community. The unfortunate incident in Sainte-Basile, it appears, influenced the Diocese to close the

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24 SCIC Archives, Novitiate Register and List of Mothers General. See also Laus Deo, pp. 22-25. Mothers Routanne and O’Ttoole were in their early forties when their generalates commenced.
25 SCIC Archives, Novitiate Register and Necrological Records.
26 Laus Deo, p. 29.
27 Ibid.
28 In the twentieth century St. Patrick’s Home came to be called St. Patrick’s Orphanage and was restructured to accommodate both boys and girls.
convent there in 1873 and direct its attention instead to the Acadians of southeastern New Brunswick. Consequently, in 1873, a convent was established in Memramcook not far from Moncton, which was, through railway connections, more accessible to Saint John than the Sainte-Basile foundation had been. This convent was staffed mostly by French-speaking sisters. Thus, when Mother O’Toole assumed office, the Sisters of Charity had in addition to its English-speaking foundations in Saint John and Fredericton, one house serving the Acadians.30

Beginning in the 1880s, there appeared to be an attempt on the part of the diocese and the Sisters of Charity to apportion the resources of the congregation along the linguistic and demographic lines defined by the English-speaking Irish-Catholic, and French-speaking Acadian, communities. For example, when an English-speaking convent was opened in Moncton in 1886, two years later an Acadian convent was founded in Shediac.31 The apostolates of the Sisters of Charity emphasized education and social work. But politically, they also underscored the ethnic diversity of the Roman Catholic community in the province of New Brunswick.

That diversity was strongly reflected in the ethnic divisions within the Sisters of Charity novitiate. In the years 1854-1897, approximately two-thirds (63.3%) of the entrants were Irish, that is, either born in Ireland or born in Canada of Irish ancestry. One-third (31.3%) were Acadian. Those classified as “Others” comprised sisters who were neither Irish or Acadian and were relatively few (5.4%).32

Responding to the concerns of the French clergy and laity about the loss of language and culture by Acadian women, a French-speaking novitiate was established by the Sisters of Charity at Buctouche in 1881.33 The experimentation with a dual novitiate structure suggests the degree of concern within the community regarding the recruitment of, and socialization of, young Acadian women. Once again, the records are silent on the success or failure of this venture. However, we may assume that in a small congregation

30 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations.
31 See Figure 2.
32 See: Table 1. Novitiate Entrants By Ethnicity, 1854-1936, %, See page 133.
33 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations, and List of Mistresses of Novices. The patron saint of Acadia, Our Lady of the Assumption (feast day August 15th) was chosen in 1881. The records of the Sisters of Charity do not reveal a connection between the selection of this day in 1881 and the opening of a French novitiate in the same year. However, considering the larger ethnic struggle within the Maritime Catholic church and the desire of the Acadian clergy to secure places of influence within the episcopacy during this time, it may be suggested that the two events were hardly coincidental. See also: Leon Theriault, “The Acadianisation of the Catholic Church in Acadia, 1763-1953,” and Father Anselme Chiasson, C.C.M., O.F.M., Cap., “Tradition and Oral Literature in Acadia,” The Acadians of the Maritimes, ed. Jean Daigle (Moncton, N.B: Centre d’etudes acadiennes, 1982).
two novitiates strained the community’s resources and its sense of collective integrity. In short by 1890, the dual novitiate had been tried and apparently rejected. Notably, during the foundation period (1854-1897), all who served as Mother General with one exception were Irish-born or of Irish descent. As well, those holding the position of Mistress of Novices were also Irish, with the exception of Mother Mary Frances Routanne, originally from England and a convert from Anglicanism, who served as Novice Mistress for the French entrants during the brief period of the dual novitiate system.  

Thus, at the time of Mother O’Toole's death in 1897, the geographic outlines of the community’s expansion were in place: service to the Irish and Acadian communities of New Brunswick. But it was also apparent that the language of the then approximately ninety-five member community was to be English in the Motherhouse, and French as the situations demanded. As well, the customs and administration were, for the most part, to be Irish. These ethnic tensions were eventually to affect the congregation’s geographic profile.

THE SECOND PERIOD...
2. Expansion and Ethnic Solidification: 1897-1936

Mother O’Toole’s death temporarily and briefly interrupted the Irish control of the generalate. She was succeeded by Mother Philomene Sirois, the only Acadian to hold the office of Mother General. Mother Sirois, born in the State of Maine, had entered from the New Brunswick border village of Sainte-Basile du Madawaska in 1863. Obviously her administrative talents had been recognized by Mother O’Toole. In 1888 when the sisters opened the Saint John Mater Misericordiae Home for the Aged, Sister Philomene became superior of the foundation. At the time of her ascendance to the office of Mother General she was nearing her ninth year as the home’s administrator. Nonetheless, during Mother Sirois’ six year (1897-1903) generalate no new foundations were opened. This contrasted with virtually all previous generalates. The lack of house foundation activity and the brief term of her office suggests that Mother Sirois as an Acadian may have been perceived as only an interim appointee. Also she may not have enjoyed the same degree of access to the Irish bishop of the Diocese.

The contrasting brevity of Mother Sirois’ term reflects the overall diminished rate of success among Acadians in securing administrative posts within the community. During the period 1854 to 1897, they headed

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34 SCIC Archives, List of Mothers General, List of Mistresses of Novices, and Laus Deo, p. 23.
35 Laus Deo, p. 36. Mother Sirois was fifty-seven years old when she became Mother General.
convents only in Acadian areas, appearing to have been de facto removed from the “stream” leading to the senior posts within the Sisters of Charity. Preceded by the twenty-three year generalate of Mother O’Toule and succeeded by the fifteen-year generalate of Mother Thomas O’Brien, Mother Sirois’ six year term underscores the lack of advancement and, perhaps, lack of influence which may have characterized the career routes of Acadians who entered the Sisters of Charity.36

Mother Sirois’ successor, Mother Thomas O’Brien assumed office in 1903. A native of Carleton County, New Brunswick she had taught as a religious for many years at St. Joseph’s School in West Saint John. Moreover, she had administrative experience as Mistress of Novices.37 Under her administration the congregation was to establish Its profile in hospital care and more significantly, was to open its first foundations in western Canada.38

The circumstances surrounding the 1906 mission of the Sisters of Charity to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan underline the growth of demographic, ethnic and regional patterns in the development of the Canadian state at the turn of the century. The request for the services of the Sisters of Charity occurred at a time when the population growth in eastern Canada, especially the Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, was stagnating.39 Since the community was based in a province and region not experiencing demographic growth, and thus not being pressured to meet severe personnel demands in New Brunswick, it could afford to take up the call to “mission” in western Canada without reducing its diocesan commitments.

Invited by the local Oblate pastor, Father William Bruek, The sisters of Charity took over the operation of the orphanage already in existence since 1899. The earliest orphans had French surnames, although one youngster, reflecting eastern European immigration, was called Moise Fidler. Before the Sisters of Charity arrived, the orphanage had been staffed by a French-speaking community, the Sisters of Providence. However, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigration trends within Canada produced an immense increase in the English-speaking population of Saskatchewan. At the turn of the century those in charge of the Prince Albert Orphanage responded to the plight of the Roman Catholic Child Emigration Movement in Liverpool and contacted the Catholic English Rescue Society in Great Britain, offering to take seventy children at the Prince Albert facility. With

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36 SCIC Archives, List of Mothers General.
37 SCIC Archives, List of Mistresses of Novices. Mother O’Brien and her successor Mother Carney were in their mid-fifties upon becoming Mother General.
38 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations.
Mother Thomas O'Brien, Mother General from 1903-1918
Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception Archives, Sr. Elizabeth Legere Laus Deo 1854-1954
St. Joseph’s Hospital, Radway, Alberta, in 1926 with Sisters Benedicta, Aimee and Joseph standing at the entrance of the first hospital structure used by the sisters prior to the later construction of a modern facility.

Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Photograph Collection

Our Lady of Mercy Infants’ Home, Vancouver, British Colombia, opened in 1929.

Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception Archives, Photograph Collection
the advent of greater numbers of English-speaking orphans, and non-French-speaking immigrants, the pastor decided that an English-speaking congregation of sisters was needed. Hence, the English-speaking Sisters of Charity of Saint John now assumed responsibility for the orphans and the facility in Prince Albert came to be known as St. Patrick’s Orphanage.

In Saskatchewan the Sisters of Charity eventually opened a total of four houses, including a hospital in 1910, four years before St. Joseph’s Hospital in Saint John. Saskatchewan became the community’s gateway to western Canada as missions were opened in Alberta and British Columbia. In many ways the challenges of the western missions renewed the community’s missionary spirit which, more than fifty years earlier, animated the founders who had cared for Irish orphans and missioned within the timber colony of New Brunswick.

In short, the geographical migration of the Sisters of Charity followed the demographic development of Canada, a trend reflecting the waning presence of the Roman Catholic French-speaking laity in western Canada with a simultaneously increasing demand for the services of an English-speaking congregation.

Although New Brunswick was not experiencing the population boom of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it would seem that in the face of requests from some sectors of the Diocese of Saint John for more parochial schools, the Sisters of Charity might have engaged in greater expansion within their home province. But they did not. They went west. Possibly one clue to the congregation’s western migration rests within its community’s ethnic and demographic structure.

The decision by the Sisters of Charity to accept the call in 1906 to establish missions in the West eventually led to an increase in the congregation’s English-speaking membership. That trend reflected the influence and support of an Irish English-speaking clergy and lay community. Between 1905 and 1923 the Sisters of Charity grew from about 115 members to about 220, a number of whom came from the community’s high school in Saint John. At the same time the establishment of the western missions had some immediate and negative consequences within the bilingual congregation. Notably, the attention of Mother O’Brien and the Council to the expansion of the Sisters of Charity into western Canada in fact restricted the development of activities in the French language in the Acadian areas of the

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41 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations.
42 More research needs to be completed to fully explain the causes of this growth.
home province of New Brunswick.

In 1914, and again in 1915, the Acadian sisters wrote to Mother O’Brien seeking permission to leave “in order to open a novitiate among the French population.”

Closing the novitiate at Buctouche in 1890 had effectively removed the possibility of a French novitiate within the Sisters of Charity. In their earlier letter the French sisters had written Mother O’Brien claiming that “members of our Acadian clergy... have reportedly told us that it is well-nigh impossible to [direct] their girl-parishioners to enter our Community as it is now constituted.” Moreover, they continued, the “chief objection, in former times, was to the almost exclusive use of the English language at the Mother House and in most of the outside Houses.”

Perhaps, Mother O’Brien was not inclined to listen to the complaints from Acadian clergy because during the years of her generalate the entrance rate of Acadians had remained constant within the community. Overall the Sisters of Charity were attracting new members at about twice the rate of previous years.

As well, despite the unhappiness of the French-speaking sisters, Mother O’Brien’s focus was on the western missions, the new hospital in Saint John, and, perhaps most importantly in terms of the congregation’s status, the efforts to constitute the Sisters of Charity as a Papal Institute in 1914.

By the end of World War I, there was an increase in the numbers of young women wishing to join the Sisters of Charity. As a result, the position of Mistress of Novices assumed a more formalized role with the records suggesting a routinization in the appointment procedures. To those observing the community from outside, the Sisters of Charity had emerged as more than a provincially-based congregation obliged to consult with the bishop about every decision. Achieving the standing of a Papal Institute allowed the congregation greater financial independence and the status of being able to have a direct line of communication with Rome. As well, following the Decree of Praise, obedience no longer remained with the bishop of Saint John. Within the community, a key trend was the assumption by Irish-Canadians of greater control of the leadership of the congregation.

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43 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Thomas O’Brien, Box 3A, Folder 307, November 1915.
44 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Thomas O’Brien, Box 3A, Folder 307, 21 December 21, 1914.
45 Ibid.
46 See: Table 1. Novitiate Entrants By Ethnicity, 1854-1936, %.
47 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations. See also: Correspondence of Mother Thomas O’Brien, Box 3A, Folder 308, 16, Act of Incorporation, 1918. The Decree of Praise was granted on November 28, 1914.
48 SCIC Archives, List of Mistresses of Novices.
as it moved into a broader Canadian context.

In 1918 the generalate changed hands. Mother O’Brien was succeeded by Mother Alphonsus Carney, the first Saint John native to occupy the office. Born in 1861 just outside the city limits, she had attended the schools operated by the Sisters of Charity. In 1881 when many of her New Brunswick generation were emigrating to the “Boston States,” she entered the community, and spent much of her religious life teaching in the schools of Saint John. In the port city, the sisters were now running schools, an orphanage, a home for the aged, a hospital, and the Boys’ Industrial Home. Within the province there were the French-speaking convents at Memramcook, Shediac, Buctouche, and the Moncton home for the aged. And in Saskatchewan, there was the orphanage and hospital. By any secular standard of her day, Mother Carney was assuming a sizeable administrative responsibility.

Impressively, during her twelve-year term, there was a doubling of house foundations. But these successes were temporarily dwarfed by the ethnic tensions within the community.

Sensitive to, and struggling with, the French-English issue within the community, Mother Carney in the 1920s attempted to balance the opening of houses within the English and French-speaking sections of New Brunswick. However, none of these convent openings were enough to thwart what may be considered the community’s first major personnel crisis. After many years of unsuccessful efforts to set up a French novitiate, an agreement was made between Mother Carney and the French-speaking sisters who wished to separate from the community.

Each side chose a symbolically significant feast day on which to petition Rome. On August 15, 1922, the religious and “national” feast day of Acadia, the French-speaking sisters wrote to Pius XI, requesting essentially that he approve the understanding taken between the “...French element and the

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49 Laus Deo, pp. 45-47.

50 SCIC Archives, Novitiate Register.

51 Mother Carney would have been confronted with a city-wide health crisis in the fall of 1918 when the influenza epidemic necessitated a ban on public gatherings, closing schools, places of amusement and curtailing church meetings and services. See: St. John Standard [Saint John, N.B.] October 22, 1918; October 28, 1918; November 4, 1918; November 6, 1918; November 11, 1918; November 12, 1918.

52 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations. See also: Figure 1 and Figure 2.

53 See Figure 2.
Mother Alphonsus Carney, Mother General from 1918-1930
Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception Archives, Sr. Elizabeth Legere Laus Deo 1854-1954
Irish element within our community." It was very clear to the French-speaking Acadian sisters that the English-speaking sisters within the Sisters of Charity were in their words the “Irish element.”

Mother Carney wrote the Pontiff on September 8th, a feast day celebrating the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That date also underscored the canonical and no doubt devotional relationship of the Sisters of Charity to the Blessed Virgin – especially following the Papal Decree of 1914 after which the community became known as the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception. Mother Carney urged the Pontiff to ratify the agreement by which “our Sisters of French origin” may constitute “themselves a distinct and separate community.” That same day Mother Carney wrote Cardinal Sbarretti in Rome. As he was the Cardinal Protector for the community, she advised him of the Council’s decision regarding the separation: “...these sisters have been agitating for this separation for years to the detriment of the religious spirit and the destruction of peace and harmony.” This observation in all likelihood conveyed the feelings of many of the “Irish element” regarding the separation. Mother Carney added that “only a complete separation would restore this peace and harmony.” Hence, she urged His Eminence “to use your influence to have this agreement ratified by the Holy See.” “Knowing the conditions in Canada as your Eminence does,” she confided “you will understand the necessity of this separation.”

Separation was granted and became official in 1924. Under that agreement, the Sisters of Charity ceded to the French congregation the houses serving the Acadian population. Separation also had an immediate impact on the size of the congregation: fifty-three Sisters departed from the community of approximately 230. It would take another five years until the community approached its pre-separation numerical strength.

Effectively, the Sisters of Charity withdrew from the French-speaking

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54 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Carney, Box 3B, Folder 802, August 15, 1922. See Table: Novitiate Entrants by Ethnicity, 1854-1936 % on page 133.

55 Indeed, the accuracy of the Acadian sisters’ perception of the “Irishness” of the community may be surmised from the obituary notice in 1957 which referred to the deceased sister “with her Irish brogue” and also the fact that the Sisters of Charity did secure entrants from the migration pool of single young Irish women who were emigrating from Ireland to North America at the turn of the century. See: SCIC Archives, Necrological Records, obituary notices for Sister Marcellina, 1957 and Sister Maura Keyes, 1970.

56 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Carney, Box 3B, Folder 802, September 8, 1922.

57 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Carney to Cardinal Sbarretti, Box 3B, Folder 802, September 8, 1922.

58 SCIC Archives, Mother Alphonsus to Cardinal Sbarretti. See also: Leon Thériault “The Acadianisation of the Catholic Church in Acadia, 1763-1953.”
sections of New Brunswick and the new congregation, the Religieuses de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur, assumed responsibility for these apostolates. The Sisters of Charity were now free to devote their energies exclusively to the English-speaking sections of the province and to the ever burgeoning western missions.

Within New Brunswick, Rosary Hall was established in 1926, and in 1928 the sisters assumed the teaching and nursing responsibilities at the Maliseet Indian Reserve. Earlier in her administration, Mother Alphonsus had agreed to the opening of Mount Carmel Academy, a girls’ boarding school in Saint John. But undeniably the thrust of the community’s development was the West. Even during the difficult period of the negotiation of the separation, Mother Alphonsus had agreed to open more houses in Saskatchewan. Following the completion of the separation, western development was extended to Alberta and British Columbia.

In 1930 when Mother Loretto Quirk succeeded Mother Carney, she inherited a congregation completing its period of expansion and just beginning to witness the effect of its western expansion on the composition of the novitiate. As the sisters established foundations in the West, particularly through their teaching activities, the community began to attract western recruits. This phenomenon coupled with the separation of the French sisters dramatically altered the ethnic composition of the novitiate. The biographies

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59 See: SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Thomas O’Brien. In their letter of December 21, 1914 to Mother O’Brien, the French-speaking sisters spoke of the loss of Acadians to other congregations and suggested that a congregation “perfectly competent to teach the French language in its purity…” would have more success attracting Acadian women to its community.


Beyond New Brunswick issues of language and culture also emerged within religious congregations. For a discussion of the issue during the mid-nineteenth century within the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa see: Emilien Lamirande, Elisabeth Bruyère, Fondatrice des Soeurs de la Charité d’Ottawa (Montreal: Éditions Bellarmin, 1992).

60 Laus Deo, pp. 59-60.

61 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations. See also Figure 2.

62 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations.

63 SCIC Archives, List of House Foundations. See also Figure 3, Sisters of Charity, Canadian Foundations to 1936.

64 Laus Deo, pp. 67-68; See also SCIC Archives, List of Mistresses of Novices.
of some of the early recruits from the western provinces reflected the intra-continental North American migration patterns of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thus some entrants, such as Sister Katherine Mutter who had been born in Wisconsin, were brought as young children with their migrating parents to the farmlands of the “last, best West” in Saskatchewan.  

When analyzing the novitiate register, and comparing the ethnicity of entrants during the periods of 1854-1897 and 1898-1936, some striking patterns emerge. For example, the Irish component is 63.0\% and 54.0\% respectively; the Acadian component is 31.0\% and 18.0\%; and the “Others” category (English, Scottish, German and east European) is 5.0\% and 28.0\%. Many of the “Others” had come from the West. The Irish component remained more than half during both the foundation and expansion periods.

Viewed another way, the novitiate’s ethnic and geographic composition differed markedly from the ethnic structure and geographic origins of the community’s administrators. The composition of the administration was initially Irish and then New Brunswick-born of largely Irish descent. Moreover, the Irish maintained a dominance in the position of house superior.

By 1936 when Mother Quirk relinquished her post, two houses were opened in British Columbia and the last major foundation in New Brunswick was established at St. Stephen. Both the geographic dimensions and ethnic shape of the community were in place. The congregation had evolved from a diocesan community to a Papal Institute with foundations in eastern and western Canada. Its language was English and its tone as set by the senior administration had moved from Irish-born to Irish-Canadian.

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65 SCIC Archives, Necrological Records, Sr. Katherine Mutter obituary.
66 See: Table 1. Novitiate Entrants By Ethnicity, 1854-1936, %, see page 133
67 SCIC Archives, Novitiate Register, House Records, and necrological records.
68 Although the Sisters of Charity did establish missions in Peru in the 1960s, the community’s Canadian profile was fixed largely by 1936.
69 Anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that ethnicity or ethnic identification within the Sisters of Charity was not uniformly experienced even though through much of the congregation’s history there was at least a symbolic attachment to Ireland as the cultural base of the founder and earliest sisters.

Recent literature on ethnicity has suggested that “ethnicity is not a constant or uniform social experience either for individuals or for groups. Rather, it is a variant, processual, and emergent phenomenon and will therefore reveal itself in different forms and with varying degrees of intensity in different social settings.” See: Martin N. Marger and Phillip J. Obermiller, “Emergent ethnicity among internal migrants: the case of Maritimers in Toronto,” Ethnic Groups (March, 1987), p. 2. See also: Raymond Breton, et. al., Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experience in a Canadian City (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp.1-7; and Wsevolod W. Isajiw, “Ethnic-Identity Retention” in Raymond Breton, et.al., Ethnic Identity... in a Canadian City, pp. 34-91.
THE THIRD PERIOD...

Following the adjustment period after the departure of the Acadian sisters, and the rapid geographic expansion of the twenties and early thirties, the community strengthened its services in various apostolates by concentrating on furthering the education of its members.

Some sisters – such as Sr. Mona McGrath and Sr. Louise Friel, who entered in the early 1920s – had arrived with university degrees in hand. Although such credentials were unusual, nonetheless, based on the research to date, some of the sisters who entered between the twenties and forties had a higher level of education than was the norm for the day and several had completed studies at the Provincial Normal School. As well, a few of the early nursing sisters had trained at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. That some of these women may have sought out the Sisters of Charity as a way of combining a life of dedicated service to the church and a career route for professional expression, no doubt, is a comment on the lack of parallel opportunities in the secular life.

During the generalate of Mother Loretto Quirk (1930-1936), several of the sisters attended summer sessions at university. However, with the advent of Mother Clarice Haggerty’s term (1936-1948) the trend began towards permitting sisters, and one might suspect, encouraging those viewed as academically talented, to attend school full time. While some sisters attended secular institutions, the earliest numbers appeared to have been sent to Mount Saint Vincent in Halifax, St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., St. Louis University in Saint Louis, Missouri, and Fordham University in New York City. A number of the sisters took their nursing education at St. Joseph’s School of Nursing which was associated with the community’s hospital in Saint John. The pattern is clear. Generally Catholic institutions located either in Maritime Canada or the East Coast of the U.S. were the earliest preferable locales for the advanced education of the community. The courses of study focused on aspects of general education, usually with a view to teaching and various fields within hospitals.

During this period of stabilisation, 1936-1965, evidence exists to suggest that a few sisters were encouraged to pursue doctoral work. In 1947 the first member of the community to do so received her Ph.D. from the Catholic...
University of America in the field of education. Although the congregation did not have its own university or enjoy the access to a post-secondary institution such as Mount Saint Vincent University operated by the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, members of this community rose in the administrative ranks of the community’s high schools. Indeed, public recognition was given to the Sisters of Charity in 1945 when one of their number, Sister Angela Gillen, was awarded an honorary LL.B. from the University of New Brunswick for her contributions to the field of secondary education in the city of Saint John.  

By the 1950s and early 1960s, sisters graduated from the Ontario College of Art, Queen’s University, Boston University, and the University of Alberta among others. The earlier predilection for select Roman Catholic institutions seemed to be diminishing. Moreover, it appears that the teaching sisters frequently pursued undergraduate degrees even though a certificate from the Normal School was a sufficient credential. Women entering the community from the 1920s and onward were given opportunities for educational advancement. In this sense, for many young Catholic women, even those entering as late as in the mid-1950s, life in an apostolic community held more potential opportunities for professional self-fulfillment than the secular workplace. For those entering in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, the convent, evidence suggests, was a generation ahead of the secular world by providing such opportunities, especially for talented women coming from the working classes.

The increasing emphasis on furthering the sisters’ educational preparations in the 1930s was accompanied by extending the community’s western foundations to the Pacific coast. In May and July of 1929, Archbishop William Duke, a Saint John native, wrote to Mother Carney noting the needs for a school and maternity home in his Archdiocese of Vancouver. After these requests were met and in the waning months of 1930, Duke broached the possibility of having the sisters run a hospital in Vancouver. However, the following year Mother Quirk advised him to postpone this project. She

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73 There are many institutions of higher learning in Halifax, while in Saint John a permanent university presence was not established until the 1960s. Residents of the city of Saint John did not have the opportunity to attend university in their city until January 1951 when the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton offered courses on the premises of the Saint John Vocational High School. Among the first professors to participate in this initiative was the well-known historian W.S. MacNutt. See: Evening Times Globe (Saint John), January 1951.

74 SCIC, Necrological Records, Sr. Angela Gillen.

75 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Canvey, May and July 1929.

76 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Carney, November, 1930.
noted that “Mother [Carney] and I talked the hospital over many times. We
thought it better to wait till spring owing to the great depression [sic].” 77

The planning for the Vancouver Hospital resumed shortly after the
commencement of Mother Clarice Haggerty’s generalate in 1936. In 1938
construction began and the following year the hospital was opened. Sister
Ruth Ross, a native of Nova Scotia, was placed in charge. Among her sister
assistants was Sister Camillus Duke, the younger sister of Archbishop Duke.
By 1940 the Sisters of Charity had five foundations in British Columbia.
Perhaps for the Sisters of Charity from Saint John, establishing foundations
in British Columbia was made easier, as Mother Carney observed, because
“the sisters do not think they are far from Saint John when Father Duke is
in Vancouver.” 78 This remark underscores the Saint John or eastern
Canadian view of the congregation as a Saint John community missioning
in the West.

In 1938 when the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto withdrew from St.
Joseph’s Convent in Winnipeg, the Sisters of Charity took up the staffing of
St. Joseph’s School in a German-Canadian, but English-speaking, parish in
the north end of Winnipeg. An indication of the mission activities of this
group was evident in the extensive Christian Doctrine program operated
throughout the school year for students from the public schools and the
continuation of this program throughout the summer in more remote locales
outside the city of Winnipeg. The latter necessitated sisters living with
parishioners when carrying out the vacation summer school Christian
Doctrine program. 79 As the Winnipeg work indicates for the Sisters of
Charity in the late 1930s, an assignment in a rural locale outside a major
Canadian city meant living away from the more structured environment of
the convent. 80

Mother Haggerty’s administration was also active in the extension of
convents in Alberta and parts of eastern Canada. In Wetaskiwin, forty-five
miles south of Edmonton, the Sisters of Charity staffed St. Joseph’s School
for an English-speaking community containing various ethnic groups. 81 In
the mid-1940s, the sisters opened one school in Digby, Nova Scotia and two

77 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Loretto Quirk, Mother Quirk
to Archbishop William Duke, September 23, 1931.

78 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Alphonsus Carney, Mother
Carney to Archbishop William Duke, December 16, 1928. This comment also
underlines some of the individual familial relationships which bonded the Sisters of
Charity as a community to their new apostolates, paralleling the integration of
western Canada’s “frontier” within the nation as a whole.

79 Laus Deo, pp. 78-79.

80 Sisters of Charity with experiences in both the east and west have remarked
on the generally less formal atmosphere in the western houses.

81 Laus Deo, p. 79.
convents in Quebec, which were however, located in English-speaking, ethnically “Irish” areas of the province. Here the sisters operated schools.\textsuperscript{82}

In all of these house openings during the thirties and forties, as always, within the Canadian mosaic, the bilingual and ethnic realities of the country were a paramount concern. When Mother Haggerty was succeeded in 1948 by Mother Joan Kane, the community had more than 375 members staffing foundations in seven of the ten Canadian provinces.\textsuperscript{83}

Mother Kane’s accession to office revealed the ongoing control of the generalate in the hands of Irish-Canadian sisters from New Brunswick and particularly the city of Saint John. Mother Kane continued the emphasis on advanced education, which was by the late 1940s a well-established characteristic of the community.

Among a number of older sisters, Mother Kane is recalled as “the builder.” Several large scale projects were completed during her generalate: two in western Canada, and two in New Brunswick. In Saint John “Marycrest,” located just outside the limits of the port city in the suburban village of Renforth, was planned as a rest and retreat house for the sisters.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 81.

\textsuperscript{83} There were no foundations in Ontario, Prince Edward Island or Newfoundland.
Ethnic divisiveness and the attendant apprehension of missioning in far away provinces, which had characterized the generalates of her predecessors, were almost non-existent during Mother Kane’s administration. But her term in office had other challenges – the complexity of which, and eventual outcome of which, may not even have been recognized at the time.

Mother Kane, who entered the community in 1916 and spent her career in the community teaching in the schools of Saint John, had been socialized as a young religious in the 1920s and had come to maturation in her career as a religious during the 1930s. No doubt, during these years Mother Kane internalized the mission vision of the community as it developed and was implemented in the 1920s and early 1930s. Mother Kane was fifty years old when her generalate began 1948. Having spent more than thirty years in the community, her own life cycle and the then evolutionary level of the community placed her in the position of carrying on the tradition of the ‘twenties and ‘thirties through the post-war period.

The twin challenges of her administration involved responding to the increasing demands for schools and hospitals, while dealing with the just emerging outline of a decline in vocations. Mother Kane and her Council, working within the administrative and community role models of an earlier

Dormitory, St. Patrick’s Orphanage [Silver Falls], Saint John, New Brunswick circa 1950 with Sister Agnes Raymond

Source: Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception Archives, Silver Falls Photograph Collection
period, addressed the needs of post-war family formation with better-educated sisters while continuing to improve services.\textsuperscript{84}

The external stimulus, which prompted development along the previously successful lines established in the period of foundation and refined during the period of expansion, was provided by the countless letters arriving continuously from desperate bishops and priests in Canada, the United States and even from Kingston, Jamaica. In the main these dioceses were confronted with post-1945 growth of Canadian suburbia and its needs for schools and hospitals.

These letters provide small windows on some aspects of post-war Canadian development. Pleas for teaching sisters came from those wishing to establish English-speaking schools in Quebec, from Metropolitan Toronto in which local congregations were unable to extend themselves, from Native schools in New Brunswick and British Columbia, and from the United States.

In one letter written from the western United States, a Montreal Sulpician noted that he had spent forty years in Gardner, Colorado and that he needed an English-speaking community to establish a Catholic primary school. Regarding his parishioners, Fr. Trudel, whose first language was French, wrote his English-speaking compatriot, Mother Kane in Saint John: “They are Mexicans but the [sic] English is the official language in U.S.”\textsuperscript{85}

Even after forty years in the States, Fr. Trudel was sensitive to the ethnic and linguistic benchmarks which would resonate in his native Canada.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Laus Deo}, p. 87. See also: SCIC Archives, Sr. Rita Keenan, “Biographical profile on Mother Joan Kane.”

\textsuperscript{85} SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, May 1957.
Some dioceses went to great lengths to secure the services of English-speaking sisters. Bishop Tessier of Noranda offered Mother Kane a newly constructed high school for the congregation. Other bishops appealed to the community’s missionary spirit. Writing in 1956 from Prince Rupert, the Vicar Apostolic noted that “the loss of Faith of these children attending public schools is staggering.”

To all these requests Mother Kane responded sympathetically, usually citing the lack of finances with respect to hospital construction, or the expense of distance to some of the more far away non-Canadian locales. But in many of the letters, particularly to those with whom the community had a connection, such as the Redemptorists, Mother Kane bluntly underscored the increasing lack of vocations.

This fall in religious vocations was a persistent concern. Today, in the popular mind, at least, the decline in vocations is a phenomenon of the mid-1960s and later. But for the Sisters of Charity, the beginnings of a perceptible decrease in overall vocations occurred around 1950. Although the numerical strength of the community continued to increase until the early 1960s, the rate of vocations slowed after 1950.

Further research is needed to determine if Mother Kane and the Council appreciated these demographic factors. However, judging from the negative responses sent to requests for sisters, the community was feeling the effects of the diminution in the number of recruits. Declining an offer to build a hospital in Hamilton, Ontario in 1952, Sr. McGrath, First Councillor, wrote: “we are understaffed in all our institutions and many of our sisters are breaking down from doing too much.” Four years later Mother Kane wrote, rejecting another hospital project: “In common with so many communities we are getting only enough candidates to carry on the missions already established, in fact we tried to close one small hospital on account of an inadequate supply of nursing sisters.”

By the mid-1950s bishops and priests were sensitive to the personnel difficulties of apostolic women’s religious congregations. Increasingly, letters held out the prospect of vocations coming to the Sisters of Charity if they set up a school in this or that parish. Writing from a new suburb east of Edmonton, Alberta, Fr. Henry Peet observed: “The population of Beverly is of the better labour class with a vivid faith and we expect that several boys

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86 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, Fergus O’Grady to Mother Kane, 11 December 1956.
87 The Redemptorists staffed one of the largest parishes in Saint John, St. Peter’s Church. The Sisters of Charity staffed the parish school from its founding in the late 1850s to the mid-1980s.
88 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, Sr. McGrath to Bishop of Hamilton, Ontario, January 25, 1952.
89 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, December 31, 1956.
and girls of this parish will enter the priesthood or the religious life. For him, such an occupational choice was still viewed as sufficiently attractive within the structure of opportunities available to the sons and daughters of the Catholic working classes. Other priests, such as Fr. John Cunningham, a Redemptorist who represented a Winnipeg suburban parish containing in

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90 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, Fr. Henry Peet to Mother Kane, May 25, 1955.
his words “a new housing scheme and a new school,” tried to persuade the sisters to establish a school in his parish. Obviously feeling comfortable in speaking frankly with Mother Kane, and also attempting to anticipate a possible negative response from her, he wrote: “I know you will say ‘why have you not sent us more vocations?’” Adding that he recognized that the community could “take many more for your charities,” he reminded her “that St. Alphonsus, Edmonton, where I was Pastor before coming here, has sent you a goodly number of vocations and I would ask you to please remember me to two of my former parishioners [and here he named two women then in the novitiate].” Further personalizing his plea, he concluded “I sang the funeral Mass for [the] Mother and Father” of [name of the novice].

Mother Kane wrote back noting that she had met him and knew of his kindness and generosity to the sisters in the various Western missions, especially Edmonton. But she advised him that the community was only able to make replacements of the sisters forced by age or sickness to retire. “Many of the girls who enter” she added, “have not finished High School and it takes several years to train them after they finish the Novitiate.”

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, the total number of religious in the community reached, and maintained, a plateau of about 400. After the mid-1960s entrants dropped well below replacements and the convent closings began in earnest. By the mid-1980s the congregation numbered approx-

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91 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, Fr. [John] Cunningham to Mother Kane, 29 September 1956.

92 SCIC Archives, Correspondence of Mother Joan Kane, Mother Kane to Fr. [John] Cunningham, 26 September 1956.
imately the same as the early 1930s – about 270. Of course, the age pyramid would reflect a disproportionate number of older sisters in the congregation of the 1980s.

Mother Kane’s term ended in 1960. Paradoxically, it was during the generalate of the “builder” that the first traces of the new era of declining vocations and house closings began. Mother Kane and her generation reflected an era during which religious played a major role in educational and health services. However, their apostolates also witnessed the emergence of greater government involvement in the policies of their institutions. Moreover, stemming in part from the changes following the World War II, social developments such as the renewal of a more vigorous feminism and the improvement in employment opportunities for women in the secular world, drained away the pool of Roman Catholic women needed to carry out the vision of programs and development the Sisters of Charity adopted in the twenties and expanded throughout the subsequent two decades.

In the 1950s some of the senior sisters, then in retirement, contributed to the operation of the community by engaging in the traditional activity of chaining the large rosary which was still an integral part of a sister’s habit [dress]. At the same time another generation of religious were acquiring driving licenses. Perhaps, in attempting to cope with the intrusion of modernity into the everyday structure of communal life and would to bridge the generation gap, when transporting themselves by automobile, the sister in charge call upon someone to lead the rosary ....

As the sisters in the late 1950s and early 1960s travelled down the well defined highway between the community’s first Saint John Cliff Street foundation/motherhouse and the new future motherhouse at Marycrest, in a vehicle affectionately called by one – the “Rosary Roadster,” – could they, or could any of us, have suspected what challenges lay ahead in the unmapped expanse of post-Vatican II?

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Novitiate Entrants by Ethnicity, 1854-1936, %*</th>
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93 SCIC Archives, Novitiate Register and Necrological Records.
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*Compiled from the Sisters of Charity Novitiate Register, Sisters of Charity Archives, Saint John, New Brunswick.*