

FRANCES- THE CURIOUS VOICE

Moira MacManus IBVM

A Message from the Author, Moira MacManus

My 'dream' was that the 'Good News' story of Teresa Ball's life could be read and enjoyed by children of a young age.

I want them to understand the story of this great, shy Dublin woman and how she cared for the poor and how she opened schools to teach rich and poor children how to read and write.

In this booklet, there is some more information that will help teachers, parents, family and friends to help young children learn more and tell all their friends about her life.

And finally I hope that maybe some day these children will go on to teach other little children to read and write. Perhaps it will encourage them to help to care for the sick and lonely and try to be like Teresa in some way.

Listen in your heart for what God is calling you to be and you may get a big surprise - just like Teresa did on hearing the Curious Voice.

Enjoy.

Dedicated to my Parents and Family.

Teresa Ball: a great unknown hero of the 19th century

Author's Introduction

Teresa Ball was Irish foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, commonly known as the Loreto Sisters. Her story has been lost in time; her work largely forgotten. This short biography hopes to redress that by remembering this remarkable and courageous woman who gave up a privileged and wealthy upbringing to help the poor and needy. At a time when Ireland was in political upheaval and about to face its darkest period, the Famine of the 1840s and its devastating aftermath, her work is a shining example of the extraordinary things that God's love and the simple teachings of Jesus can achieve. Hers is a story I am proud to tell. I hope you enjoy it and, like me, are inspired by her.

Family Background

Teresa Ball was born in Dublin on January 6th, 1794 to Mabel Bennett and John Ball. Mabel hailed from Eyrecourt in Galway and was the second wife of John, a wealthy Dublin silk merchant. A widower, he was a convert to Catholicism and had a son, also named John, by his first wife.

Teresa, known as Frances to all, was the youngest daughter in this second family, alongside three sisters Cecilia, Anna Maria and Isabella and brother, Nicholas. They lived at No. 47 Eccles Street (now No. 63), a relatively opulent home in an affluent area of the city. Frances was her father's darling who could do no wrong in his eyes. Her brother Nicholas adored her too and would become a major influence on her young mind and heart.

The seeds are planted

Mabel and John Ball were well known for their kindness and generosity, and instilled these virtues in their children. Their caring spirit certainly rubbed off.

As a child, Frances accompanied her father and sisters in visiting the sick and needy in the tenements of the then highly impoverished city of Dublin. Anna Maria followed in her father's footsteps by making major contributions to, and completing, projects on behalf of the city's socially deprived and marginalised population; she would later become co-foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity. Isabella, the sister nearest in age to Frances, appears to have had a quieter nature but was equally devoted to the poor and destitute. Frances' eldest sister, Cecilia, joined the Ursuline order in Cork and continued her family's virtuous work there.

In fact, it was at Cecilia's profession as a nun that Frances first heard the biblical passage that would leave a lasting impact on her and completely shape her life:

Seek you first the kingdom of God and all things will be given to you.

Frances' life takes shape

Political unrest in Ireland at that time saw Anna Maria and Isabella head to school in York, England. Managed by the sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (I.B.V.M.), it was a highly regarded centre of education. Many daughters of wealthy Catholic Irish families were sent there in preference to European schools. Its foundress was Mary Ward who had dreams that '*women, in time to come, would do much*' but was imprisoned in Rome for her forward thinking ideas and labelled a heretic. These were not enlightened times.

In 1803, Frances was sent to York, much to her dismay; at nine years of age she felt she was much too young to go. Her now elderly father thought the same. However, Mabel insisted. Thus, Frances set off accompanied by her brother Nicholas. She was lonely beyond words there and longed to be back with her beloved father whom she missed terribly.

That was not to be. Tragically he died within a year, clutching a story written for him by Frances in her childish hand. She was devastated and inconsolable. Despite her tender years, her determination and courage saw her through these dark days.

Exile and return

Frances became a popular and intelligent student who was greatly loved by teachers and students alike. She excelled at literacy and languages, and was also an accomplished musician. Her future looked bright and promising but, once again, family circumstances would alter the course of her life.

Her widowed mother, who was suffering from great loneliness, decided to bring Frances home to Ireland. Frances was very disappointed to be unsettled once more; she was enjoying her studies and wanted to pursue them further. Prior to her return, she wrangled a guarantee from Nicholas that she would continue her education at home.

In 1808, now fourteen years old, she sailed home with Nicholas. He kept his promise to Frances and she was exposed to culture, languages, music and debating with him while he studied at the Law Society. However, whilst Frances outwardly settled into family routines, the biblical passage she'd heard years earlier was never far from her thoughts. Very soon she would come to face the true meaning of these words somewhere she least expected.

Her night of nights

Nicholas was anxious to have his beautiful sister launched on the social scene in Dublin. It would have been expected that Frances would marry into the upper echelons of Catholic ascendancy. So, he organized a Grand Ball to mark the occasion. It was to be her 'night of all nights'. And so it turned out to be - though not in a way that anyone was expecting.

Frances' initial expectations were not disappointed. She was escorted in a horse-drawn carriage accompanied by her mother and Nicholas; she danced with several young suitors - truly the 'belle of the Ball'. But inwardly Frances sensed that something wasn't right. Despite her enjoyment she felt empty; she wanted more than the momentary glitter the night had to offer. Frances begged her mother to leave but reluctantly agreed to stay. But the words that she'd heard in Cork echoed even stronger in her heart: *Seek you first the kingdom of God and all things will be given to you.*

The next morning she confided in a dear family friend, Father Murray (later to become Archbishop of Dublin), who understood these feelings and simply advised her to continue praying for ongoing enlightenment.

Her future mapped out

Unbeknown to Frances, Father Murray had aspirations of establishing Catholic educational schools for girls in Dublin and in her he saw the potential to realise these hopes. He had written to the leader of the York Convent, Mrs Coyney, to ask her to consider preparing someone in York who would lead such a group in Ireland. She agreed to this but refused his request to supply sisters from the York community. Nor

would she have its role publicly known, lest the school not materialise. In a pre-Catholic Emancipation era this was a hard but realistic way to protect the interests of all.

Another chance twist of fate

In due time, Frances told her mother what her heart desired. She strongly disapproved and refused her permission for Frances to follow her dream of becoming a religious sister. Frances was deeply anxious about her mother's intransigence.

As fate would have it, one day Frances and her mother went to a different church than usual for their morning Mass. The priest, as if inspired, spoke about parents who refused to listen to their children who wished to become religious. Naturally, Mabel felt the message was directly intended for her. On arriving home, she relented and gave Frances her blessing.

Frances was thrilled. By this time her mentor, now Dr Murray, had become coadjutor to the Archbishop of Dublin and was well placed to make instant preparations for Frances to go to York. Although Frances did not see herself in a leadership role and would have wished with all her heart not to be such, it is likely she had some idea what Dr Murray's plans were for her.

Return to York

On the June 11th, 1814, Frances set sail again for her alma mater, this time for very different reasons. She sadly bade farewell to her mother, sisters, family and friends. In York Minster, accompanied by Nicholas, she dallied and wandered until the very last moment before farewells and goodbyes had to be said. It must have been heartbreaking for both, though alleviated somewhat by the warm greeting from her former teacher, Mrs Coyney, who was now the community leader.

For the next seven years, Frances - who took the name Teresa in honour of the great Teresa of Avila - was trained in the traditions of this outstanding Institute, and wholeheartedly threw herself into all the community's activities. One could find her in the classroom where she was greatly loved as a teacher. The sick and frail experienced her care and compassion. Even the furniture and surrounds were lovingly attended to as part of her house responsibilities. She was constantly in demand and was never once heard to be disgruntled by these demands. Deeply aware of the need to be well prepared for her future demanding role, she accepted all in a spirit of knowing and understanding.

She made her Final Profession on September 9th, 1816, taking as her motto: *'The mercies of the Lord I will sing forever.'* This motto inspired and repeatedly supported her through the many challenges and disappointments she faced on her own journey through life.

Challenging times

Sr Teresa was faced with major challenges almost immediately. Anxious about her Dublin school venture, she needed companions to help her set it up. Her first two volunteers - Rosetta O'Reilly and Bridgid Sheridan, both from Dublin - tragically died of tuberculosis in York. One can only imagine how she felt at these devastating event; she must have also wondered if the venture would ever get beyond the walls of York.

But her doubts were soon dispelled. Others had volunteered, and when three students were willing and ready to go, Dr Murray bought a house in Rathfarnham thus planting the first seed of the Institute in Ireland. While the house was being readied, Sr Teresa agreed to move everyone in with her old friend Mary Aikenhead in Stanhope

Street, and start their work from there.

So, on August 11th, 1821, she and her two novices - Anne Therry from Cork and Eleanor Arthur from Limerick - travelled from Liverpool to Dublin on *The Waterloo*. For whatever reason premonition or divine intervention - Teresa appeared not to trust the sea worthiness of their original chartered boat and insisted they take another. Some records show that the rejected packet ship, *Earl of Moira*, sank on route. A higher force seemed to be looking after them.

During their nine-month stay in Stanhope Street, novices Anne and Eleanor were professed, taking the names Sr Baptist and Sr Ignatia respectively. They then rented accommodation in Harold's Cross beside the Poor Clares and opened a school there. Finally, on November 4th, 1822, they moved into the as yet unfinished Rathfarnham House. They were welcomed there by Teresa's mother, family and friends, and was a joyous occasion for all.

Prospering times

The school grew despite great opposition from other denomination schools in the area (Catholic Emancipation did not occur until 1829). The numbers of novices grew too. The fledgling group received great support from family and friends, while Dr Murray remained a constant bulwark of encouragement and spiritual guidance.

Sr Ignatia's sister and brother-in-law, Mr & Mrs John Scully, were invaluable early on. John took over the running of the farm and maintenance of the house, while his wife taught in the school. They also paid for furnishing several of the rooms out of their own pockets and certainly helped ease the way forward. Loreto House, as it was subsequently renamed, was up and running.

Visionary educational thinking from the start

Teresa created a spirit and atmosphere in a school rarely seen before. She introduced the young sisters to methods that she had experienced in York, and organised the curriculum. Only the best would satisfy her in this area, with a wide and varied syllabus on offer.

Languages featured prominently with French being the language of conversation; English, Spanish and Italian were also taught. History and Geography also featured, as did Mathematics and the sciences. The cultural subjects of Art, Drawing, Dance and Music were provided too. Needlework and delicate tapestry were encouraged. In fact, the children were encouraged to sew and knit garments for the less well-off, echoing the kind and caring values she had learned from her own parents.

Within six months, she also opened up what was then known as a 'Poor School'. From May 1823, deprived children were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, needlework and knitting. They were also fed and clothed, a necessary undertaking at the time. She loved the children of both schools equally and they in turn reciprocated her love..

What a testimony it is to Teresa's visionary educational approach that the school prospered and is still growing on Grange Road, Rathfarnham, over one-hundred-and-ninety years later! Slowly but surely, news of its academic success and broad holistic curriculum spread far and wide. Teresa had no idea that she would be invited to spread her vision further than Dublin.

Parish priests, bishops and other religious began to request that she open schools at home and abroad. At first she was reluctant but relented, having spent time in prayer looking for guidance. Her Loreto sisters opened up schools in the four provinces of Ireland. As

other foundations grew, she reached out to them in an ever-widening correspondence, keeping each new community in touch with what was happening in the others. The constitutions and rules that she had brought with her to Ireland from York were printed in 1832 and a copy was sent to each superior of a 'filiation from Michelgate Bar York'.

Between 1841 and 1847, she sent fifty-four sisters abroad without any hope of ever seeing them again, confessing she felt like the 'mother of the Maccabees' as each boat sailed out of sight. Forty-six of her sisters died before she did, mostly of consumption. By 1861, a total of 33 houses had been founded in Ireland, England, India, Mauritius, Spain and Canada. Shortly before she died that same year, in the beloved Dalkey house she herself designed, she had agreed to open two other schools in Kilkenny and Killarney.

Teresa had taken a fall while in Rathfarnham and appeared to have damaged her hip. Sadly, it was discovered that she had incurable cancer. Knowing that her end was near she asked to be brought to Dalkey. This was done as lovingly as possible as she was in terrible pain even throughout the short journey; she uttered not a word of complaint.

She died there on the May 19th, 1861, surrounded by her loving community. Her body was brought back to Rathfarnham. Following Requiem Mass presided over by Archbishop Cullen and fifty priests, she was buried in the new Abbey graveyard, her final resting place.

Her inspiring legacy lives on

The legacy of this great woman did not die with her. It lived on in the Loreto tradition of being aware of the less well-off in communities at home, such as the 'Poor School' on Grange Road. It lived on in the hearts and minds of her early followers who believed they were preparing girls to 'do much' in the socially and economically deprived society of their times. It lived on in their belief that these young ladies would be harbingers of hope and justice in a time of gross unfairness towards women and children.

It lives on today in those countless sisters and co-workers who, like Teresa Ball, listened to God's great dream for them and spread 'the mercies of the Lord '. It lives on wherever a Loreto seed is sown in Ireland or in far-flung reaches of the world today and into the future.

Teresa Ball would be very proud of her 21st century pupils. May they continue to flourish and blossom forever.

In the words of Jesus, echoed by Mary Ward and Sr. Teresa: *'May they all be One.'*

Moira MacManus I.B.V.M.