I keep imagining her sick, weak, frail yes, I imagine her lying on that hospital bed in one of those pokey cubicles

I imagine her feverish, nauseous, aching taking one bitter medicine after another drinking syrups and soups trying to keep her energy up clutching at straws of hope

And then the good news arrives! Is it possible that nineteen years of waiting have come to an end? that the dream had been given a chance to become reality?

But what a chance! How could she take such a step when she was hovering between life and death? when her very life seemed to be sucked out slowly by illness?

What would the future be? Did she have a future? Dare she make such a bold step when frail health and circumstances all screamed against it?

Frail health and circumstances had never been her masters frail health and circumstances had played insignificant roles during the waiting years

She had always coasted on the wings of faith and trust these had led her and would lead her still

Her eyes on the Lord her mind on his promises being fulfilled now she went on

She stood alone, on a firm faith a lone MMM she grasped Love with both hands she summoned all her strength and declared to the hearing of six witnesses MMM is born.
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Marie Martin 1892-1925

Notable events during the first 33 years of her life.

<table>
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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>25 April: Born at Glencar, 20 Marlborough Road, Glenageary, Co. Dublin, and was baptised at St. Joseph’s Church, Glasthule.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Family moved to Mount Town House.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Family moved to Greenbank, Monkstown.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Marie was sent to a ‘finishing school’ in Bonn, Germany and visited Cologne, Munich and Oberammergau.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Marie accompanied her Uncle Charlie on a cruise to the West Indies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>September: following outbreak of War, Marie trained as a VAD nurse at the Richmond Hospital, Dublin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>October: Marie was posted to St. George’s Hospital, Malta, during which time her brother, Charlie, was killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>June: Marie was posted to Hardelot, France, where she served during Battle of the Somme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>June: Fr. Tom Ronayne, a Monkstown curate, became Marie’s spiritual director.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Marie assisted Dr. Joseph Beatty in Monkstown during the influenza epidemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>1 January: Marie returned to England to gain further nursing experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>April: Fr. Ronayne introduced Marie to Fr. Joseph Shanahan CSSp (later Bishop).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>July: Marie began training in midwifery at the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>November: Fr. Ronayne and 8 Dublin priests sailed for Nigeria with Fr. Shanahan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>25 May: Marie sailed from Liverpool, with Agnes Ryan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>14 June: Marie arrived in Calabar, and was met by Fr. Ronayne.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>December: Marie made a two-week trek from Calabar to Onitsha, via Nsukara and Owerri.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>March: Marie returned to Ireland, with Fr. Ronayne, and at the request of Bishop Shanahan entered Killeshandra.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>After 18 months, Marie left Killeshandra believing a medical missionary congregation had special requirements. She spent the next nine years following her Dream, until eventually the way led to Glenstal and all that followed.</td>
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Their dates of birth were separated by only 19 years. Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin would never know of Marie Helena Martin, at least not on this earth. But she was destined to have a major influence on the life of Marie Helena – the woman who would one day become the Foundress of the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

Marie Françoise Thérèse was born on January 2, 1873, the youngest of nine children of Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin of Alençon, France.

This devout couple had known great loss. A little daughter named Marie Hélène had died at the age of five and a half. Another, Marie Melanie Thérèse died when only three months old. The couple dearly desired a son who might become a priest and a missionary. For this they prayed fervently. But their only son, Marie Joseph Jean Baptiste, died at the age of 5 months. Another son was born, and they christened him Joseph too. But he flew off to heaven at the age of nine months.

When they brought their last baby to be christened, they could hardly have imagined that one day she would announce that she wanted to become a priest. But that was an idea the church would find difficult to accept.

Sorrow was never far from the Martin household. Zélie developed cancer. She bore this suffering for years until her death, on August 28, 1877. She was 47 years old. Little Marie Françoise Thérèse was not yet five. She later wrote about the loss of her mother: “My happy disposition completely changed, I became timid and retiring, sensitive to an excessive degree…” Attacks of scruples and anxiety would come later.

Louis Martin, felt the heart had gone out of their Alençon home. He moved the family to Lisieux. When Marie Françoise Thérèse was eight, her father enrolled her as a day pupil in Benedictine Abbey in Lisieux. She hated the place and classes bored her. The nuns realised her intelligence was above average and put her into a class with fourteen-year-olds. She was still bored. Her father finally removed her from the Abbey and provided private tutoring for her.

When she was nine, Thérèse suffered a prolonged serious illness. No treatment helped. One day she turned to a statue of the Virgin Mary near her bed, and prayed for a cure. “Suddenly”, Thérèse wrote, “…Mary’s face radiated kindness and love.” She knew she had been cured. The statue has since been called Our Lady of the Smile.
The story of how Thérèse wanted to become a Carmelite – but was too young – is well known. In 1887, when her father took her and her sister, Céline, on pilgrimage to Rome, she defied all protocol. During the audience with Pope Leo XIII, she ran to his feet and cried out: ‘Most Holy Father, I have a great favor to ask you!... in honour of your jubilee, permit me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen.”

“Well, my child,”, the Holy Father replied, “do what the superiors tell you”

Resting her hands on his knees, Thérèse made a final plea. “Oh, Holy Father, if you say yes, everybody will agree!” She later wrote: “He gazed at me steadily speaking these words and stressing each syllable: ‘Go – go – you will enter if God wills it.’ The guards had to lift her and carry her to the door. On New Year’s Day, 1888, the Prioress of the Lisieux Carmel advised Thérèse she would be received into the monastery the following April.

Thérèse perceived her life’s mission as one of salvation for all. She would accomplish this by becoming a saint. She enjoyed playing the role of Joan of Arc in a play she wrote for a feast-day performance in Carmel. She thought of herself as the new Joan of Arc, dedicated to the rescue not only of France, but of the whole world. Her spirituality was grounded in love, and in a deep faith that what God wanted was never impossible. “O my Jesus! Thou dost never ask what is impossible...” she wrote in her autobiography.

Marie Françoise Thérèse died on September 30, 1897, having suffered greatly from tuberculosis. She was only 24 years old. She was canonised on May 17, 1925 by Pope Pius XI. She was named Co-Patron of the Missions in 1927 and became the third woman Doctor of the Church in 1997.

In Dublin, Ireland, Marie Helena was born on April 24, 1892, the second of twelve children of Thomas Martin and Mary Moore who lived in Glenageary.

Marie Helena and her younger sister, Ethel, were sent to the Sacred Heart convent, Leeson Street, to prepare for First Holy Communion. But Marie developed rheumatic fever in 1904 after a drive home from Leeson Street on an outside car during a snowstorm. This was to leave her with a legacy of heart trouble and ill health that dogged her throughout her life.

This Martin family also knew sorrow. On St. Patrick’s Day in 1907, when Mary Martin was pregnant with her twelfth child, her husband, Thomas, died from a gunshot wound, believed to be accidental. The bond between Marie and her mother grew even closer after that. Mrs. Martin sent her two eldest daughters as boarders to the Mercy Convent in Edinburgh, but had to bring them home again because ‘Marie was so homesick’. In September 1908 they were sent to the Holy Child convent in Harrogate, England. But after the Christmas vacation of 1910 Marie did not return. The resident German governess in the Martin home recommended a finishing school in Bonn. Mrs. Martin travelled with her daughters to check it out, but Marie only stuck it until the end of the year, after which she accompanied her Uncle Charlie on a cruise to the West Indies. Few nineteen-year-old Dublin girls of that period were so widely travelled.

When war broke out in 1914, Marie trained for the Voluntary Aid Detachment, and was posted first to Malta and later to France. She was nursing wounded soldiers, when, on December 27 1915, news came that her own brother, Charlie, was missing, reported
wounded and captured. Months of anxiety followed until it was confirmed at the end of June that he had been paralyzed by his wounds, on December 8, and had died two days later.

That was just one week before his 21st birthday.

When the war was over, Marie Helena returned home, matured by the things she had seen. In 1921, at the age of 29, she went to Nigeria as a lay missionary. The situation she encountered quickly convinced her that single-handed she could do little. To make any impact, she would have to establish a Congregation of committed religious women, trained in medicine, surgery and obstetrics.

But that was an idea the church would find difficult to accept. Besides, few Universities would allow women into Medical School in the early 1920s. These obstacles did not cause her to doubt her calling. She was guided by a deep belief: “If God wants the work, God will show the way.”

Yet, in 1927 it seemed impossible that the calling she felt so deeply could be followed in her lifetime. Mindful of the missionary role of the recently canonized St. Thérèse, she thought she might follow the way of Carmel instead. She sought admission to the Carmelite convent at Hampton, Dublin. Although she received all the votes of the community, the Prioress, Mother Dympna, was convinced that her vocation was not to Carmel.

Marie Helena had to wait until 1936 before the church acknowledged the value of religious women in the practice of surgery and obstetrics. When she made her vows on April 4, 1937, she was gravely ill in a government hospital in Nigeria. She took the name Mother Mary of the Incarnation. When well enough, the doctor advised that she take the first ship back to Ireland.

In 1949, she made a visit to Lisieux, where she told the prioress, St. Thérèse’s sister, Pauline (Mère Agnes) about the history of MMM with its many ups and downs. Mère Agnes promised ‘to see to it that my holy Sister Thérèse will answer all your petitions and the intentions of your friends and benefactors, and obtain all that your Congregation needs.’

Mère Agnes presented Mother Mary with a stone from the wall of the convent infirmary where St. Thérèse had died – a gift to be used as a foundation stone for the new hospital which Mother Mary hoped to build in Drogheda. Mère Agnes added a prayer that the Saint would adopt the entire MMM congregation, ‘showing herself ever a sister to the MMMs, labouring in and through them, and spending her heaven doing good with them on earth’.

These Martin girls were women of their time. Their writings and spirituality were informed by the language and theology of that time. To the mindset of today that can appear out of date. But the courage of these women in overcoming personal difficulties and external obstacles does not become dated. Their determination to follow their dream no matter what the cost, will inspire people in every age.

At 2 pm on Sunday May 20, 2001, the Reliquary of Saint Thérèse will arrive at the Motherhouse of MMM in Drogheda, where it will repose until noon on the following day. When it leaves, en route to the Cathedral in Cavan, the cortège will pause for just a moment at the entrance to St. Peter's Cemetery. In the hospital, two hundred yards to the left will be the stone from the Infirmary where Thérèse died.

Two hundred yards to the right, will be the tomb of Marie Helena Martin, who died on January 27, 1975. We can surely depend on abundant graces from heaven at that blessed moment.
“Few episodes in the battle annals of the British Empire can match the nine-month Gallipoli campaign for waste of life of the rank and file, for valour, suffering, endurance and loyalty on land, sea and, for the first time, in the air and for indecision and incompetence in the leadership and ill-luck in the military sphere. The two contending sides fought face to face and chest to chest and died like the flies that fed on their unburied bodies.”

So notes John A. Mizzi, author of Gallipoli, the Malta Connection.¹

Gallipoli and its Malta connection played a significant part in shaping the worldview of the young Marie Martin. These events painted the backdrop against which would soon begin to emerge her awareness of the call to establish the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

Early in August of 1914, Britain, France and Russia were drawn into what had started as a local war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary, and which eventually involved 32 nations. It was naïvely thought that this would be ‘the war to end all wars’.

Ireland was still under British rule, and while conscription only applied on the mainland, many young Irish men volunteered for service. Tommy Martin, Marie’s older brother, had graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, and went to the war with the Connaught Rangers. A younger brother, Charlie, aged 20, was still an undergraduate, but gave up his studies and trained with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers at the Curragh Camp.

The changing times made a big impact on the young women too. Marie Martin, then aged 23, applied to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VADs). Later, her younger sister, Ethel, and her Aunt, Lily Moore, did likewise. Marie was immediately accepted and sent for three months’ training to the Richmond Hospital in her native city, Dublin.

The Voluntary Aid Detachment, founded in 1910 as an emergency volunteer reserve, was a division of the British Red Cross. It was intended as a home defense unit to be mobilized only in case of invasion. Two-thirds of the volunteers were women. VADs have been called ‘Roses of No-man’s-land’ and ‘Lilies of the Field’. But these young women who left comfortable homes to perform the most menial of nursing duties – in crowded hospitals and First Aid Stations whose patients were horrifically wounded and maimed – had courage stronger than steel.

In July 1915 Charlie Martin’s regiment sailed for Gallipoli, arriving at Suvla Bay on August 7. This campaign had been badly devised from the start. The planned invasion of Turkey from the Gallipoli peninsula was aimed at diverting Turkish forces from the pressure they were putting on the Russians. Success would provide a direct ice-free supply line to Russia via the Black Sea. At the same time, the Gallipoli campaign was seen as an opportunity to open a new ‘theatre of war’ as an alternative to the stalemate that had developed on the Western Front – with both sides entrenched along a 500-mile stretch from the border of Switzerland to the North Sea.

In February 1915 the British and French navies had attempted an invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula

from the narrow straits known as the Dardanelles on the northwestern coast of Turkey. They suffered terrible defeat. Again in April, this time supplemented with Australian and New Zealand ground forces, the loss of life was tremendous, with little to show for it. In August, a new major offensive was begun.

The Mediterranean island of Malta, like Ireland, was under British rule in those days. At the outbreak of the war, Malta had four small hospitals with a total of 118 beds. Its quick-thinking Governor, Lord Methuen, ordered the expansion of existing hospitals and the selection of buildings suitable for conversion. A scheme was drawn up to extend the number of beds to 2,000 on the island of Malta, with a further 500 beds for convalescents at Fort Chambray on the adjacent island of Gozo.

Initially it was expected that those sent to Malta would be only slightly wounded, just needing convalescence before returning to the warfront. But the landings at Gallipoli’s Suvla Bay were accompanied by a rising tide of sickness which was to ravage the troops even more than enemy wounds. Dysentery and enteric fever put huge demands on the emergency services throughout the summer of 1915. As these decreased with the onset of winter, they were replaced by trench fever and frost-bite.

In those months, Malta managed to convert several barracks, schools and even two Governor’s palaces providing 28 hospitals with a total of 20,040 beds at the peak of the emergency. During this peak period, the average bed occupancy was 16,004. By January 1916 Malta had 334 medical officers, 913 nurses including VADs and 2032 rank and file members of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Lieutenant Charlie Martin was wounded at Suvla Bay, but not seriously enough to be sent home. Two months after he had sailed for Gallipoli, Marie was called up for service with the VADs in Malta. Her mother accompanied her to London where they spent a week together before Marie joined the hospital ship Oxfordshire. The ship had 250 beds, but at times carried as many as 550 wounded men.

On October 22, 1915, they reached the harbour at Malta’s capital, Valletta. They were a day earlier than expected so their assignments were not ready. Marie, a city girl who loved social life, was delighted when they were allowed ashore for three hours. She and her pals were anxious “to see as much as we can in case we are banished to the other side of the island”. They explored Valletta and “had tea and deadly rich cakes”. This was probably at Blackleys where she returned on other occasions when she got her half day off duty. Next day she was assigned to a converted barracks on a peninsula overlooking St. George’s Bay, on the northern shore of the island about six or seven miles from Valletta. It had opened as a hospital on May 6th. Beds at St. George’s numbered 840 when Marie arrived but were increased to 1,002 in November.

Dr. G.R. Bruce, Specialist Sanitary Officer in Malta, reported that “St. George’s Hospital occupied a large area, since the majority of wards were small, holding at that time ten patients each; consequently the staff,
considerably under numbered at first, had to work under great difficulties. As at most of the other hospitals, the sick soon predominated over the wounded at St. George’s.”

Dr. Bruce also noted that “…the new staff, however willingly, were mostly without experience of the work and necessary routine of military hospitals. However, this deficiency was largely discounted by the great zeal and enthusiasm shown by all concerned, regardless of regular meals and sleep, and it was remarkable how soon the staff became efficient in their new roles.”

That zeal and enthusiasm was shared by Marie Martin, the youngest of the VADs who had sailed on the Oxfordshire. She wrote to her mother on October 28 saying “The work is really hard, but of course it is what we came out for.” A letter of November 25 said “I am just as happy as I can be on duty and I only wish I had two pairs of arms and legs to be able to do twice as much.”

In one letter home she reported that she had “about 120 beds to make each day. Sheets are scarce and the dysentery is appalling.” In another, she was caring for 140 patients, many of them with broken backs. Her time off, she said, went on sleep or writing letters for very ill patients. When a patient died, she would write to his mother with details of his final days.

October brought mosquitoes and sand flies that left her face in a terrible state and her eyes swollen. Sometimes the sirocco wind was strong. Days were hot and airless. But by December it had become cold, and in the pouring rain they were drenched going from ward to ward.

Whenever she could, Marie would make her way to the convent chapel of the Blue Sisters in St. Julian’s for Mass or Benediction. She told her mother, in a letter of November 7, that the Reverend Mother at the Blue Sisters’ hospital would like her to be transferred there. Life would probably have been somewhat easier in this well-established hospital where Officers were cared for, but Marie would not ask for any such special privilege.

She was very excited when she got her first ever pay packet. The yearly salary for a VAD was twenty pounds, as well as board and uniform. She carefully registered a letter to her mother with one pound and five shillings saying “It is not very much but perhaps by Christmas I shall be able to save a little more for you and then you could buy yourself something nice you want. I wish I could only earn enough to make

saying the latest batch of patients from the Dardanelles told her there was not much fighting at Gallipoli, but no troops had been withdrawn yet, so she presumed Charlie was still there. However, in the week ending December 9th, the number of casualties landed at Malta was 6,341.

While doing the dressings a lot of news was exchanged. Patients told her conditions were terrible where they had been. Most had frost-bite. On December 18 she wrote that one young boy among a new convoy of patients told her he had seen Charlie very well about two weeks earlier. She promised her mother that next day she would contact the Wounded Bureau on the island to find out if any of the new arrivals were from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. They might have more news of Charlie.

As Christmas approached, with all the other staff Marie was busy trying to get the wards decorated and presents ready for the patients. She was off duty just in time to attend Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Patrick’s church in Sliema, a glorious night, and after it they had to walk most of the three miles or so back to St. George’s.

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2 Military Hospitals in Malta During the War, by G.R. Bruce, MA, MD, Capt. RAMC.
On December 27, Marie received a cable from her mother saying the War Office had notified her that Charlie had been wounded and was missing. Very distraught, Marie redoubled her efforts in search of news of her dearly loved young brother. She hoped against hope that he might yet arrive on one of the hospital ships. The Medical Information Bureau in Malta frequently appealed to the patients for news of comrades, asking for any information at all on lists of men reported missing. But on December 29 with a heavy heart, Marie had to write home saying there was no news in Malta of Charlie’s whereabouts.

The New Year of 1916 dawned. On January 4 she wrote home again saying she had been trying hard to get news. The people she met at the War Office were very kind. She had phoned Salonika, but the only news there was that Charlie had been wounded between 5th and 11th December. She had one and a half days off duty and wrote from Dowdall’s Hotel where she had gone with a nurse friend “to think and rest and make enquiries”.

The weeks passed with little news. An Officer who was a patient at the Blue Sisters’ Hospital told her Charlie had been slightly wounded in the arm on December 6th. On January 24th, she wrote home saying it seemed likely he had been taken prisoner.

By then, all the Allied troops had been evacuated from Gallipoli – the authorities having decided to abandon any further attempt to capture Constantinople by that approach. Work slackened in Malta.

On February 6 Marie could report that she had met several men from Charlie’s regiment. They knew he had been wounded on December 7th and again on December 8th, after which he and about a hundred others went missing. They were sure he had been taken prisoner. They all thought very highly of Charlie. He always used to say “What’s good enough for the men is good enough for me to get on with”.

A few days later, Marie met two Officers who explained that there was only one road off the hill Charlie had been on, so it was most likely he had been taken prisoner.

March came, still no definite news – until, at last, Marie came across a patient who had actually seen Charlie being wounded in the leg on December 8th. He told her the Bulgarians had captured the whole trench and marched them away. He was sure Charlie had not been killed.

Greenbank was the family home where Marie Martin lived from 1900 onwards. In 1936, when the founding community of MMM left Glenstal, Mrs. Martin converted the basement of Greenbank into a temporary home for them.

Marie Helena Martin
All of this was taking its toll on Marie, and by March 22 she was “longing for home”. Four days later she wrote saying she had met another patient who had been with Charlie when he was wounded. This man gave his young Officer great praise for having held up the advance, making the retreat possible. He was sure Charlie was a prisoner.

Marie continued her search for information. In April she went out to St. David’s Camp, where she met another man who was in Charlie’s Company. He told her Charlie had been giving orders on the parapet and was wounded badly through the shoulder. He was with them for fifteen miles when they had to retreat. Then the Bulgarians captured him and about thirty others. This man himself felt lucky to have escaped.

Work in Malta was very slack by now. Marie’s six-month contract was ending. In her last letter from Malta, she said she knew there was more to be done in France.

Marie left Malta on Holy Thursday, which fell on April 20th, in 1916. The journey home, took two weeks including several days in London. She was still on her way home when, on the following Monday, April 24th, the Easter Rising began in Dublin. Life in Ireland would never return to the pre-war world she had known.

A month later, Marie was called up again for service, this time at Hardelot in France. Just a few miles east of them, the First Battle of the Somme began on July 1st, and would claim 1,200,000 lives before it ended in December. They could hear the firing at the Front and ambulances were ferrying in convoy after convoy. At one point, for four days she had to care for 56 stretcher cases suffering from gas poisoning, with only one orderly to help her.

It was in Hardelot on July 2nd, that Marie received news from her mother saying she had been informed that Charlie had died of his wounds two days after his capture on December 8th. His death had come just one week after his 21st birthday.

Marie’s six-month contract in France ended just before Christmas of 1916. Later, for a brief period in 1918 she would again serve as a VAD, this time in an English convalescent hospital at Leeds.

Marie spent the whole of 1917 at home. As she reached her 25th birthday she began to make a serious discernment about her future. She prayed much. Gradually, it became quite clear, at least in broad outline. She wrote: “Next day I went to meet my friend. I wore my new navy suit and white spats. I told him that for me marriage was out of the question. But as yet I did not know what to do.”

That was the beginning of a long twenty years of following a persistent yet uncertain dream. Before long it would bring her to Nigeria where she witnessed at first hand the need for a medical congregation of religious sisters. Then came years of ill health and other obstacles before eventually, on April 4th 1937, she made her vows while very ill in a government hospital in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

At that moment MMM was born. She became known as Mother Mary Martin. When she died in 1975, the Congregation she had founded had grown to 450 sisters. Today MMMs come from 18 different nationalities and work in 16 countries.

Two of the greatest disasters of World War I were the 1915 campaign to capture the Turkish peninsula of Gallipoli and in 1916 in France, the battle for the towns and villages north of the River Somme. During both these campaigns, Marie Martin, who later founded the Medical Missionaries of Mary, nursed wounded soldiers in Military Hospitals as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment.

Marie was billeted in a ‘sweet villa’
Marie Martin dropped a post card into the mail box at London’s Charing Cross station before boarding the early morning boat train. The card was to her mother in Dublin. As a teenager, Marie had suffered much from homesickness while at boarding school in England and Scotland and later when she was sent to a finishing school in Bonn. But that was back then. Now she had turned twenty-four and she felt she was needed in France.

The Mail Boat to Boulogne was very crowded. Marie and the four young women with her sat on their luggage all the way. They docked at the French port in time to have lunch at the Boulogne Tower Hotel. Marie liked city life and the social amenities it offered.

By 5 p.m. on that Saturday afternoon in June of 1916, the five young women were travelling again. They were not quite sure to where, exactly. In wartime, destinations were kept secret until the last minute. By 7:30 p.m. Marie had arrived at the coastal resort that would be her home for the next six months – BEF No. 25, a General Hospital of the British Expeditionary Forces.

First there was a brief visit to the surgical ward where she would be on duty next day. Then she was shown the “sweet villa” where she was billeted. She would share a room with Miss Paul. They had become friends in Malta, where Marie had completed her first six-month contract with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). They had been barely a month at home when they were called up again. Marie was hardly surprised. A few months earlier she had written to her mother from Malta, when things had become slacker there, saying that she knew there was more to be done in France.

Riddle me this!

June 18, her first day on duty, was tiring. But that night, sleepy though she was, Marie sat up in bed and wrote to her mother again. “I’ll give you three clues so you can puzzle out where we are: (1) The opposite of soft. (2) The fifth letter of the alphabet. (3) The man in the Bible whose wife was turned into a pillar of salt.” The three clues did not prevent the letter getting past the Army censor!

Hardelot had been established as a seaside resort back in the year 1900, by Sir John Whitley, an Englishman who owned the local Château. Seeing the potential of Hardelot’s long sandy beach, fringed with sand dunes and pine forests, Whitley had dreamed of creating a magnificent outdoor sporting and leisure facility that would attract both English and French families. Whitley hoped that if the wealthy classes of England and France spent their leisure time together, it would be less likely that their countries would go to war against each other, as they had tended to do.

Edwardian families spent their summer holidays in spacious villas in the forests around Hardelot. The Château became a clubhouse for golfers, while others enjoyed sailing, tennis and cricket. Later, King George V spent two holidays there.

French families also bought property at the new resort. One was Louis Blériot. He pioneered sand-yachting on the wide flat beach – a sport that remains popular in Hardelet to this day. Then in 1902 Blériot turned his attention from the successful industry he had established in manufacturing automobile head-lamps, to begin his lifelong dedication to aviation.
In 1907 Louis Blériot made his first flight at Bagatelle, France, in an aircraft of his own design. On July 25, 1909, he braved adverse weather and 22 miles of forbidding sea and flew his monoplane from Les Barraques in France to Dover in England, becoming the first person to cross the Channel in an aeroplane. At the time, this was considered an act of great daring. The 40-minute flight won for him world fame and the London Daily Mail prize of one thousand pounds.

Blériot’s exceptional skill and ingenuity contributed significantly to the advance of aero science in his time. During the War of 1914-1918, his company produced the famous S.P.A.D fighter aircraft flown by all the Allied Nations.

Meanwhile Hardelot was taken over by the Military. The well-known Aviation Hotel was converted into a large Hospital. Marie Martin described it as ‘rather quaint’. As well as the indoor wards, the wounded were cared for in several large tents.

**Missing Brother**

On June 21, Marie wrote home again. She asked if there was ‘any news of poor Charlie’, her younger brother who had left Ireland with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in July 1915 to take part in the Gallipoli campaign. At the end of December, the family had been notified by the War Office that Charlie had been wounded and was missing.

When she was in Malta, Marie had spent all her free time seeking news of Charlie, and hoping he would arrive on one of the hospital ships. But by now she felt there was not much hope that he would turn up. Her mother, on the other hand, could not accept that Charlie might be dead, and kept her hope alive by writing a daily diary for him, to bring him up to date when he would return.

As Marie wrote home on June 21, she could hear the gunfire distinctly at the Front, even though it was nearly one hundred miles east of Hardelot. The thundering sound of the powerful Howitzers carried on the wind. The firing had continued all day long. Here, she was much nearer the Front than she had been in Malta. At the town of Albert nearer the front line, a triage system would determine which convoy was sent to which of several military hospitals along the route to the coast.

Marie was left under no illusion by the Sister in charge of her ward. Sister Makenzie simply did not like VAD nurses. Fully-trained SRNs tended to look down on the VADs, with their short emergency training. Yet, young women like Marie Martin and her friend who had served in Malta had gained much experience and had adapted very well to the regime of a Military Hospital. Anyway, there was no time to be worrying about the Sister in Charge when there was so much to be done. The Hospital was being evacuated, existing patients being sent back to England.

The cleaning was hard work. But it helped to keep Marie’s mind from worrying. She had had a letter from the mother of her boyfriend, Gerald, saying he had been recalled to the trenches. That caused her much anxiety. However, a half-day off duty gave her the opportunity to take the tram to Boulogne, about 10 miles away. There she was able to take a walk and have tea. She found it important to be able to share all this with her widowed mother by letter.

Meanwhile at the Front, on June 24, seven days of shelling of German positions had begun. Along a twenty-mile stretch, 1,537 artillery pieces opened fire on German lines.

In Hardelot, the Hospital was preparing for a big rush of work. Marie asked her mother to send some plug tobacco for the men. On June 30, word spread among the staff that the bombardment had started. The Hospital was practically empty. They were ready.

**Blood Bath**

Little did they know that they were about to be caught up in the biggest blood bath in the history of the British army. Historian, Timothy Bowman, tells us:

“The Somme offensive was initially conceived as a joint Anglo-French advance which would break the German lines and open the road to Berlin. The area was not chosen for any great strategic reasons: the German line was not particularly weak there, nor was the fate of any strategically important city or railway...
junction at stake. The area was chosen because here the British and French trenches interlocked...

“This was the first time that such a large bombardment had been carried out and the British High Command confidently expected that the German troops would be decimated, the few shell shocked survivors being only too eager to surrender.

“On almost any other part of the German line these expectations might have been realised but the Somme sector, with its chalk sub-soil, had been put to good use by the Germans. A series of strong points, with bunkers up to forty feet deep had been constructed to protect the six German divisions on the Front. Critically, of the 1,537 British artillery pieces, only 467 could be described as ‘heavy’ and of these, only six fifteen-inch Howitzers could penetrate the deep bunkers. Therefore, when the men of the sixteen British divisions* went over the top on 1 July 1916, they were confronted, not by a handful of shell-shocked survivors, but by six well-prepared German divisions.”

At 7.30 a.m., on July 1, in clear daylight, over 100,000 British soldiers advanced on a 14-mile front.

The bravery of the 36th Ulster Division has been well documented. On the first day, 1,994 of their men lost their lives. Two Battalions of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers also suffered heavily. They were part of the 16th Division which lost 1,167 men on July 1st – a day in which a total of 20,000 men were killed on the Allied side and almost twice that number wounded.

Casualties were treated in First Aid Dressing Stations in farmhouse basements near the Front, and then transported in rail trucks and ambulances back to the hospitals.

Saddest News

At Hardelot on July 2nd the Hospital had filled up by 5 p.m. Marie stayed extra time on duty to help Sister Makenzie who, she could see, was new to military ways. When that day’s post was distributed, it brought the saddest news – what Marie had so long feared. The War Office had confirmed to her mother that Charlie was dead. He had been wounded before being

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* A Division was 12,000 men composed of 4 Brigades, each 3,000 strong. Brigades were composed of 3 Battalions of 1,000 men each at full strength. A Battalion was subdivided into Companies and Platoons.

captured on December 8, and had died of his wounds two days later. Marie’s letter home that night tried to comfort her mother. At the same time her own grief was palpable. ‘It is really impossible to realise that we shall never see his dear face again. How we shall all miss him!’

She must have been grateful for the presence of Miss Paul with her in Hardelot. Back in Malta six months ago, this friend had given up her off-duty to accompany Marie as she made enquiries about Charlie. Now she was at hand to support her in France when the dreaded news finally arrived.

Marie was still pondering their loss when she next wrote home, on July 8. She felt it was a relief to know that Charlie had died without much suffering. The soldiers she was nursing, who were now arriving in an endless convoy of ambulances from the Front, had ‘such nasty wounds’.

She was getting her first experience of nursing men who, in addition to their original wounds from the battlefield, had developed gas gangrene. This is a condition where open wounds have become infected by bacteria that cause extremely painful swelling and can have fatal consequences if not treated quickly and carefully, sometimes requiring amputation.

While all this was going on, Marie received another letter from home with the news that her beloved friend, Gerald, had been wounded. This came as a great shock to her as she had been scouring the casualty lists and had not seen his name there. While grateful for being informed, she was anxious to know more. A short time later, she received a wire saying Gerald was alright and was going back to the trenches. When his own letter arrived he told her he had been only slightly wounded, but had had a bad time in France. He encouraged her with the words that they were all hoping to have the war ended soon. The day that letter arrived Marie could, once again, distinctly hear the pounding of guns at the Front, and she must have wondered would it ever end.

With the post, the tobacco also arrived. Marie thanked her mother for ‘such ripping stuff’ saying she would ‘keep it for her Paddys’.

Convoy after convoy of wounded men were arriving at Hardelot from Albert. Marie was transferred from the surgical ward to the medical section, in the tented wards of the Hospital. She spent a lot of time getting two tents into shape, where she was put in charge. She was pleased when Matron told her she was one of the senior and responsible VADs. She felt Sister Makenzie must have given a good report of her after all. With fresh flowers she added a touch of normality to her tents which had been put up in haste, and which Marie felt were not properly equipped. She told her mother the tents were very nice in the sunshine, but when the rain came they were just awful.

Social Activities

Despite the rush of work, there was time for some relaxation. On July 13 Marie found herself on a Committee of Nursing Staff and VADs who were preparing a tea for the 180 Orderlies at Hardelot. She had spent her day off buying the groceries including tipsy cake and other goodies. And yet, the convoys were arriving all the time from the Front.

Towards the end of July, things slackened off for a short while in Hardelot. An epidemic of diarrhoea hit the tents where Marie was working and that had to be investigated. The tents were closed for the moment. The recent patients had been Australian, but like the others, once they were well enough to be moved on from Hardelot, they were sent on their way to make room for more arrivals from the Front.

By now Marie had come to know Miss Dorothy Whitley, daughter of Sir John, the Englishman who had established the resort at Hardelot. Miss Whitley used to come to the Hospital with flowers from her garden at Pré Catelan. When off duty, Marie sometimes walked through the woods to visit this lovely house that reminded her of home.

By August 13, the tents were filling up with soldiers coming in with gas poisoning. Marie felt happy to be where she was needed. For four days she was nursing fifty-six stretcher cases with only one orderly to help her. Then Miss Paul was sent to join her.

Chlorine gas mixed with water produces hydrochloric acid. The men’s lungs just melted with the effects of the gas. It has been written:
“Tending men with terrible wounds and young soldiers with the effects of poison gas was difficult nursing. As their battle scars healed their mental scars would run much deeper. These men, who bared their souls for battle, anticipating their fate without any question, were now left with much time to reflect on all the mutilation of battle. They had seen friends’ bodies ripped apart in battle, and their fate pulled into question, while the smell of death was all around them. Helping to heal these haunting memories was as much a part of nursing as treating their open wounds.”

Marie got a lot of experience in this field of nursing, as the Medical Officer with whom she was working had specialised in gas poisoning. He had devised a strict monitoring routine until the patients were back on their feet and able to take a good walk without a change in their pulse rate. Marie found this very challenging and rewarding.

By now August was drawing to a close and the rain had come. It was ‘beastly in the tents and so nasty for the men.’ The nurses got so wet walking between tents, Marie asked her mother to send a sou’wester and boots. She could see that this place would be very cold in winter.

At the Front, the last week of August had seen a massive German offensive. In response, what Martin Stauntion has called “Nationalist Ireland’s forgotten Battle of the Somme” was about to begin.

Stauntion describes how on Saturday, 2nd September, the night before the battle, Irish troops chosen for the attack bivouacked on the bare side of a hill. Although the rain had ceased, the ground was deep in mud with flooded trenches and shell holes, a bleak and desolate landscape relieved only by the camp fires around which the men clustered.

These included many men of Irish nationalist background including nationalists from Derry and Belfast as well as from the other cities and towns of Ireland. They included many Catholics. When the chaplains administered General Absolution, the vast majority of men knelt and those of other faith stood by in attitudes of reverent respect. At dawn, Masses were said by the chaplains of all the battalions in the open and most of the officers and men received Holy Communion.

Guillemont and Ginchy

The objective was the capture of Guillemont and Ginchy. Once again this was achieved at great cost. Of the 2,400 men in the four Irish battalions that took Guillemont, 1,147 became casualties. By September 9th, the survivors were ready to attack Ginchy. The first attempt was a total failure, with lines of attackers mown down and the wounded having to wait until nighttime to crawl back to safety. A French military observer described the scene:

“The Irish, after several days passed in the trenches under very heavy artillery fire, awaited the signal and dashed forward singing. In eight minutes the companies on the left had gained the road crossing Ginchy from the north to south. Received by a concentrated fire they suffered appreciable losses…”

In the first ten days of September, the 16th Irish Division lost 240 of its 435 officers, and 4,090 of its 10,410 other ranks. They represented all four Irish provinces and different religious and political backgrounds.

News of the victory at Ginchy was soon known in Hardelot, and Marie was pleased, although she knew the casualties were enormous. “Certainly, the Irish Division was magnificent in the taking of Ginchy”, she wrote, “and I am glad to say the 16th Division is absolutely Irish”.

She kept up with news of home. When she read in the Irish Times John Redmond’s speech on conscription she was disturbed. She felt that threatening conscription in Ireland could only hinder recruitment.

Once again Marie was moved from the acute surgical wards where she had been very happy. Back in the tents, she was now caring for men with scabies and impetigo. There were two skin specialists attached to the hospital at Hardelot. Once again, Marie had fifty-six patients in her tents, and a single dressing could take up to an hour. There were days when three nurses on duty each spent twelve hours just getting through the dressings.

As winter approached, Marie began to suffer very painful chilblains on her hands and shins and feet. She had bought a little oil stove in Boulogne to heat the room where they were living. By boiling two pots of water on this little stove, she could manage to get a warm bath. They experienced ‘terrible gales and raindrops the size of eggs.’ With the worsening weather everyone wondered would the hospital be kept open in such an exposed place. This was unsettling.

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2 Cf. www.micklebring.com/oakwood/ch04.htm
3 Martin G. Stauntion: Ginchy: Nationalist Ireland’s forgotten Battle of the Somme. See Somme Heritage Centre Online: www.oz.net/~cruthin/SommeCentre/sixteenthirish.html
4 ibid.
On November 8th she told Matron that she would not be renewing her contract when her six month term was up. That meant there were 39 days left. Like the old days at school, she began crossing them off on her calendar, and as each day passed she looked forward more and more to getting home.

Early in December, the tents were finally closed. The Somme offensive had ended on November 24th. In the Battle that lasted 147 days, according to Timothy Bowman, “the Allies captured 120 square miles of land, and advanced six miles. They had suffered 419,654 casualties, that is forty men killed or wounded for every yard advanced” and “during the spring offensive of 1918, German forces reoccupied every inch of ground in the Somme sector which the Allies had captured in 1916.”

On December 8th Marie arranged with the chaplain at Hardelot to have Mass celebrated in memory of Charlie, on the first anniversary of his death, or day of capture. Her older brother, Tommy, who was serving with the troops in the Eastern Mediterranean was now a patient at the Blue Sisters’ Hospital in Malta, but thankfully he was out of danger. Marie was worried because she had not heard from her friend, Gerald, for a long time and had written “to see if he is still alive”. He was, and better still, was expected in Boulogne. On her next day off, she set out by tram to look for him there, but failed to find him. Disappointed, she returned to Hardelot, telling herself that somehow it was God’s will.

What else was God’s will? It would take a long time yet for Marie to explore the whole mystery of the vocation that lay before her. By the time she was twenty-five she made up her mind that marriage was not for her, and she promptly went to tell her friend of her decision.

Many years later, long after she had founded the Medical Missionaries of Mary, she confided that “he was the person I most loved in all the world”. But there was other work for her to do, another vision to be followed. Already it was beckoning, not clearly yet, but insistently.

The carefree social life Marie had hitherto known in her family circle contrasted starkly with the terrible suffering she had witnessed as a VAD during the war. These phases of her youth were but the prelude. Two difficult decades of searching still lay ahead.

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I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not when I came to die discover that I had not lived.

— Thoreau

The woods at Pré Catelan where Marie loved to walk. Pré Catelan is believed to be the place from where St. Augustine had embarked in the year 596 to evangelize Britain and a Memorial High Cross stands at the estuary of a nearby stream.

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Marie Martin: Beginnings

First published in Healing & Development, Yearbook 2004

It is very hard to pinpoint when exactly Marie Martin decided to establish the Medical Missionaries of Mary. It was a slow process involving many actors. It took all of two decades from her first serious thoughts on the matter before she reached the official starting point – the day she made her religious profession on April 4, 1937.

To observe the woman who persevered through such a long prelude, we need to retrace her steps, especially through the years of her young adulthood – years that were full of searching. During this time, she repeatedly used the expression ‘the real work’ to refer to caring for the sick in the most deprived places she knew.

Marie was 24 years of age when she returned to her native Dublin in December 1916. She had been nursing wounded soldiers first in Malta and then in France. She served during one of the most gruesome battles of the Great War – the first Battle of the Somme – that raged for 147 days from July to November of 1916. Marie had been changed by all she had witnessed during her two periods of service in military hospitals. And she had suffered the loss of her own brother, twenty-one year old Charlie, who had died of his wounds following his capture in Serbia.

One day in 1917, in her local parish church at Monkstown, she prayed to know what God wanted her to do with her life. Suddenly there flashed across her mind the realisation that God was calling her to become a Sister. Rather than get married and have children of her own, she would ‘mother’ many people, those who were much more in need of being loved.

She was not at all sure what exactly this implied. However, the next day she went to meet her boy-friend and explained to him that marriage was out of the question.

This decision must have raised many eyebrows in the wide social circle to which Marie belonged. As the attractive eldest daughter of a wealthy family, her position would have been noticed in the seasonal round of races, hunts, balls and tennis parties. These social events had been part of the fabric of her young adult life before the war. But by the time Marie was in her mid-twenties, her thoughts began to focus on what would completely engage her for the rest of her years.

During 1917 as she reached her twenty-fifth birthday, a new young curate arrived in her home parish of Monkstown, Fr. Tom Ronayne. Marie sought his direction. It so happened that Fr. Ronayne had a deep interest in the foreign missionary work of the church and his enthusiasm quickly appealed to Marie.

Around that time, Fr. Ronayne invited to his presbytery in Monkstown, two priests whom he wanted to introduce to one another – Cork-born Fr. Ned Galvin, who was back in Ireland after three years of missionary work in China, and Fr. John Blowick, then a theology professor in Maynooth College. The two would later become co-founders of the Missionary Society of St. Columban.

Fr. Roynane would have gladly joined them, but the Archbishop of Dublin would not release him from his commitment to the Diocese.

Fr. Ronayne’s interest in the needs of the overseas Church, and Marie Martin’s dedication to those who were ill began to gradually coalesce. For a while in 1918, Marie again went to work with men wounded in the war, this time in the English city of Leeds. By the time the armistice was signed on November 11 1918,
Marie was home. A major epidemic of flu was raging throughout Europe. This was years before the discovery of antibiotics. In Ireland, the 1918 flu struck down people of all ages, leaving a trail of deaths in its wake. The Martins’ family doctor, Joseph Beatty, was run off his feet. So, once again, Marie put her nursing skills to good use by offering to help him.

**Women doctors and nurses**

Soon the co-founders of the Missionary Society of St. Columban saw the need for women religious who would work as doctors and nurses in China. Lady Frances Moloney, a widow in her early forties, was among the audience at Dublin’s Mansion House when Fr. Blowick made a memorable appeal for a new congregation to be founded. Lady Moloney was one of the first to respond.

Fr. Ronayne had two women in mind who might also be interested. One was Agnes Ryan, a teacher in Monkstown. She had commenced medical studies at University College Dublin. When he asked Marie Martin, she replied that she would be deeply interested if a society of Sisters for medical work abroad were ever founded. Marie met Lady Frances Moloney in 1918. She felt that was the road she would follow.

On New Year’s day of 1919 Marie again sailed for England to get more nursing experience in a hospital there. At first she was with orthopaedic patients, but spent most of the time scrubbing and cleaning. Later she felt she got good experience with flu and pneumonia – in France she had become quite experienced with respiratory problems, nursing soldiers who had suffered gas poisoning.

From England, Marie continued to correspond with Lady Frances Moloney, who had gone to Dublin’s Holles Street Hospital to study midwifery.

As 1919 drew to a close, Marie was still planning to join the new missionary society destined to undertake work in China. It was now Marie’s turn to make plans to enter Holles Street Hospital for midwifery training.

They all seemed blissfully unaware of the new Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1917. This tightened the already-existing ban on women religious assisting at birth, and went even further, prohibiting them from the practice of surgery. These rules were made against the general background of a society that discouraged all women from entering the field of medicine.*

At the start of 1920, Marie Martin was needed for nursing in her own home, as her mother was quite ill. So the commencement of her midwifery training was delayed until July 22nd, that year.

Once again, Fr. Ronayne was instrumental in changing the course of Marie’s future. In 1920, the zealous Irish missionary, Fr. Joseph Shanahan CSSp, was nominated Bishop of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria. He received permission from the Irish Bishops to recruit priests for his mission on a five-year contract. Fr. Ronayne, who had been a student at Rockwell College when the young Fr. Shanahan had been teaching there, was the first to volunteer for Nigeria. This time his request to be released from Dublin was sanctioned.

Fr. Ronayne arranged for Marie Martin to meet the future Bishop Shanahan on April 29, 1920. She offered to go and help in Nigeria as a lay person, putting whatever nursing skills she had at his disposal, and telling him she was starting a midwifery course and hoped to qualify early in 1921.

By now, Agnes Ryan, already in her early forties, was a fourth year medical student. During a discussion in Holles Street, Agnes told Marie that she, too, would be interested in going to Nigeria.

Marie received her certificate in midwifery in February 1921, and was commended as ‘an excellent nurse, educated and refined.’

*Anna Dengel, who was born in Austria in 1892 – just one month before Marie Martin – was determined to enter medical school. But as a woman there was no place for her on mainland Europe. In 1913 she was admitted to University College Cork, where she graduated as a doctor on October 25th 1919. In 1925, having worked for some years in India, Anna Dengel became the founder of the Medical Mission Sisters in Washington DC. Due to the restrictions of Canon Law, the Sisters who were doctors and midwives were unable to profess their vows publicly.*
Urgently Needed

Marie celebrated her 29th birthday that April. A telegram arrived from Bishop Shanahan, who had returned to Nigeria the previous November with Fr. Ronayne and eight other priests. The telegram said: ‘Urgently needed if you don’t mind facing things alone.’

Marie wired back: ‘Will come. Have a companion.’ Agnes Ryan had decided to leave her medical studies unfinished and go with Marie to Nigeria as a lay helper. There was little time to prepare for such a momentous commitment. Communications, such as they were, made no provision for job descriptions or expectations. These concepts, perhaps under different names, operated well in the commercial world. But for women – breaking out of the moulds they occupied hitherto – such ideas were unheard of in 1921.

All the protagonists of the new missionary project lived lives that were fraught with uncertainties and determined by many factors outside their control. Somewhere in the background, each of those involved held a deep faith that the Divine Hand would guide whatever lay ahead. That the Divine purpose might be facilitated by a little clarification and planning did not seem to occur to anyone!

As the date approached for them to leave home, Marie was not feeling well and was confined to bed for the week before her departure.

It was boiling hot in Liverpool when Marie and Agnes arrived from Dublin on May 23, 1921. Marie’s brothers, Tommy and Leo, were there to meet them.

Before they left Liverpool on May 25, Tommy went scouting round the Elmina, the vessel of the African Steamship Company that would bring them to Calabar. He declared that theirs was the third best of the cabins. Marie herself found it ‘not too bad’, though she wished it had not been an inside cabin. The outer ones would have had a port-hole. Sharing the cabin along with Agnes and Marie, was a third young woman, travelling out to meet her fiancé ahead of their wedding.

A wire received on board brought good wishes from Lady Frances Moloney, whose plans for the future work of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban were forging ahead. As they steamed out of Liverpool, Marie replied, telling Lady Frances how desperately hard she found it parting from home and from her mother. The loneliness, she said, was the worst.

The same day, writing to her sister, Ethel, who came next to her in the family of twelve children, Marie confided: “I have faced it a great deal braver than I ever hoped. Grace is wonderful what it can do.” She added: “The sea between us shall never make any difference. I will always be your most loving sister.”

Marie was a seasoned traveller, having been at boarding schools in Scotland and England as a teenager. At eighteen, she had been to a German finishing school in Bonn. During this time she negotiated a trip to Cologne and from her hotel there located a Travel Agent to purchase a ticket to Oberamergau to join her Uncle for the Passion Play. At nineteen, she was taken by another Uncle on a voyage to the West Indies. She loved all the novelty that seeing new places provided.

Once on board the Elmina, she knew that if she was quick, she could send home letters with the ship’s Pilot, who would leave the vessel as soon as they had passed Holyhead. So she wrote at speed and completed several letters in the time available, telling her mother that there were 120 passengers on board, mostly young men going out to make their fortune.
Six days after leaving Liverpool, the steamship stopped at the Canary Islands for coaling. Passengers were allowed to land. Marie and Agnes took a carriage to visit the Cathedral in Las Palmas, and Quincy's Hotel. When they sailed on again at 7 p.m. that evening, they noticed it getting hotter and hotter. Due to mist they went slightly off course and passed close to the Cape Verde islands. Her letters home told of how long the voyage now began to feel. On June 2, she wrote: “Tomorrow we hope to see land, which always gives a little excitement. We hope to arrive at Sierra Leone on Sunday at 6 a.m.” Sure enough, on Sunday, June 6, Marie could gaze upon Africa for the first time.

“We were all very excited seeing the first piece of African coast”, she wrote. It was Freetown – drenched in rain driven by a great storm. Five more days and they should reach Lagos, they were told. In a week they could be at their destination, Calabar.

From then on, Marie found it an exciting time, stopping somewhere nearly every day, though it took two days, with a very heavy swell, before they reached Accra.

On June 10, about six o’clock in the morning, the Elmina reached Lagos, and remained until dawn the next day.

Marie wrote: “We did not go ashore as there was no means of getting back with safety, so the day was very long and hot.” She explained: “Getting into Lagos is very difficult as there is a very large breakwater on both sides, leaving a very narrow passage to get through. Going in we got several bad bumps…”

A few hours after leaving Lagos they ran into a tornado with strong wind and rain, but it did not last longer than an hour. They tried to get in to Bonny, but it was not safe to disembark passengers there, so they proceeded to Port Harcourt for coaling, getting there at 1 p.m. on June 11.

Of her first impressions, Marie wrote: “The run up the river was very pretty and to see the little bush huts and this very unhealthy and swampy ground, all the huts are made of clay and thatched roofs. Port Harcourt looks a terrible place from the boat and it is very hot.” From there the ship had to return along the coast to Bonny and make another attempt to disembark passengers there.

### Mission School

On June 14, as the Elmina approached Calabar, Fr. Ronayne lined up the local boy scouts to provide a Guard of Honour for the newly arriving missionaries. To his consternation he discovered from the authorities that only the teachers for the mission school, and not any other ladies, would be allowed to disembark. He rushed on board, anxious to ensure that Marie and Agnes were aware that they were ‘the teachers for the mission school’. This was the first clue the two ladies got that their expectations of being involved in health care as lay volunteers could not be realised for a long time to come.

For Agnes Ryan who had three professional qualifications as a teacher, it was probably not too strange to find herself running a mission school, which had been run by French Sisters of the Order of St. Joseph of Cluny from 1903 to 1919.

For Marie Martin, who – despite her considerable personal charisma, insight and culture – held no academic qualifications, the situation in which she found herself was not only a daunting prospect, but also deeply disappointing.

For both of these women, who had left Ireland for Nigeria as lay volunteers, finding themselves living in the former nuns’ Convent, and being addressed as ‘Sister’, demanded a rather rapid reorientation!

On June 19, Marie wrote home to her mother in a letter headed “The Convent”: “You must not laugh but from the moment we met the Frs. we have been Sister Agnes and Sister Mary + will be from this out.”

Calling them ‘Sister’ was considered expedient to distinguish the two volunteers from Protestant women missionaries, and in assuring some sort of continuity in the minds of the Convent School pupils and their parents. It had been two years since the Cluny Sisters had left the school. But, however much Marie and Agnes might have aspired to become religious at some future date, they did not yet hold that status within the church.

In July-August 1921 Bishop Shanahan visited them in Calabar. When replying to the first letter Marie wrote to him after that, he referred to it as the “first you’ve written to me in your new capacity of Rev. Mother”.

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Disguising them as religious Sisters may have helped their role before the pupils and the Catholic community of Calabar. But they were deprived of the security in those roles which actual membership of a religious community would have made possible.

By the following October, Agnes became ill with a combination of malaria and a heart condition. This required that she return to Ireland. Marie then became acting headmistress in the school of one hundred and sixty pupils, which she ran with the assistance of three local teachers. There was great financial strain as the government grant was slow in coming, and her task included supervision of building works at the convent.

**Long Trek**

Before Agnes went home, Marie resolved that she would have to make the one hundred mile trek from Calabar to Onitsha and have a *tete à tete* with the Bishop. As soon as the school closed for the Christmas break she would be ready.

She hammered out her plan with the help of the wife of the Doctor at Owerri, who assured Marie that she would be most welcome to stay at their home. Marie thought this was ‘a Godsend’. She could make the trip from there to Onitsha in a day. Getting as far as Owerri would be a bigger problem.

Before Bishop Shanahan had left Ireland in November 1920, he had set up the Catholic Women’s Missionary League to support the work overseas. Mrs. Martin, mother of Marie, became its President.

Writing home in November 1921, Marie told her mother of her planned trek, saying that Agnes, who by now was back in Monkstown, would show her the exact route from Calabar to a place called Anua. There she would stay in a Rest House three miles from the mission. This was at Nsukara, where the priest came each morning for Mass.

“I will stay there the longest”, Marie told her mother. She was excited at the prospect of this journey, which she described as “going away for a change”.

“It will be a novel experience”, she wrote. “We have to bring everything with us, food, bedding etc. and of course I will bring our best three girls. It will give me a good idea of the life and the real mission work that is before us when we have a well-established centre in Calabar.”

Our archives contain no record of what the menfolk at the mission thought about this adventure. Later, when writing Marie’s biography, Mary Purcell described what awaited these plucky women on their trek through the Bush:

“They slept in makeshift huts, one girl staying awake to keep a fire lighting and to watch for leopards, gorillas and other wild animals. At one point they found a canoe and made good progress on the river… The numbers of people at village markets where they stopped to buy food amazed her; the Nigerians, many of whom had never seen a white woman before, were just as astonished and crowded around her. Two sights moved her deeply: the prevalence of disease and suffering on a massive scale and the degradation of women.”

Bishop Shanahan and Marie came to the conclusion that the only solution was to establish a missionary Sisterhood. As Mary Purcell noted:

“Marie spoke of the need for medical care and of the primitive conditions she had witnessed on her journey. The bishop reminded her that she had been allowed into Calabar solely as a teacher but that whenever she encountered someone needing first aid she could give whatever assistance was required; circumspection was needed as the doctors and nurses attached to Christian missions of other denominations might object. He also told her that he was in touch with her mother who was interviewing girls who had offered to come out to help as volunteers.”

On January 6, 1922, Marie reported to her mother that two days before Christmas she had returned to Calabar from the trip “which I enjoyed very much and it was a great change, the only thing is it leaves the two weeks of holidays very busy preparing for reopening of school, and settling up the 1921 accounts.”

Soon after her return, Marie made a thirty-day retreat at Calabar, under the direction of Fr. Edward Leen CSSp. It appears that she made private vows, consecrating her life to God, at the close of that retreat.

On Easter Tuesday, April 18 1922, Bishop Shanahan again visited Calabar. He was to have a meeting with Fr. Ronayne and Fr. Leen, to which Marie was invited. The meeting, referred to by the Bishop as the “Mission Council”, continued for two weeks - starting at 8 a.m. and continuing to 4 p.m. each day.

The main topic was the foundation of a missionary congregation of women.

Again, Marie shared the news with her mother:

“Two weeks were spent on Rules and Constitution. I was chosen as Foundress; it may pave the way for someone more worthy… You, as President of the Mission League, are to interview candidates and refer
them to the bishop and myself. Only those hoping to become Sisters are to be sent out in future. This is very confidential.”

**Marginal and Insecure**

Correspondence between Marie and the Bishop subsequent to the Easter meeting of 1922 indicated that the work of establishing the missionary Sisterhood was to be undertaken jointly by them. But, despite the apparent clarity that emerged from that meeting, from then on Marie’s situation became increasingly marginal and insecure. Almost two years would pass before they met again. During this time much would happen to change the plans that had been discussed with Marie in Calabar.

Very soon after the April 1922 meeting, Marie was joined by three more lay volunteers, Catherine Meagher, Elizabeth Ryan and Joan Murtagh. They were a little taken aback when they learned that the aim was to establish a religious Sisterhood. Of the three, Catherine Meagher, who declared that she had no intention of becoming a religious Sister, stayed the longest – until she became ill in February 1923. She got on very well with Marie and was a great teacher. The other two volunteers returned home in July, after a bare three months in Calabar.

Some time later Marie was joined by an American volunteer, Veronica Hasson, who remained until the autumn of 1923.

The Bishop returned to Ireland late in 1922 for specialist attention for an eye injury. In June 1923 he went to Rome where Pope Pius XI encouraged him in his plans regarding the religious Society of Sisters, and recommended that the proposed novitiate should be situated in Nigeria.

Long-sought permission was eventually granted for Sister Magdalen (Mary Charles) Walker to be released by the Irish Sisters of Charity for work in Nigeria. The plan was that she would become the person charged with the formation of the expected entrants to the new missionary society. She arrived in Calabar in October of 1923.

By then, Marie had become drawn into the investigation of a serious scandal at the mission in Calabar. Public accusations had been made regarding abuses among the converts. It involved wholesale concubinage and prostitution among people who were pretending to be living as Christians. The Vicar-General had asked the priests to interview the men while Marie and Sister Magdalen Walker saw the women. This was not an easy thing for Marie to do.

Meanwhile, much had been happening in Ireland. From Sister Magdalen, with whom Marie got on very well, it became clear that Bishop Shanahan was taking steps to found the new missionary society in Ireland, not in Nigeria. Marie’s mother also gave her similar news.

Marie became concerned that the new venture would give precedence to the role of educational work in schools over the need for medical work, or ‘the real work’ as she understood her vocation.

By Christmas of 1923, Marie was feeling very frustrated. The day after Christmas, she wrote to her mother:

“ It is a year and a half since I have seen the Bishop now, many things have happened since out here. My views as to what the Sisters and Congregation should be are very clear. We have a good deal of the rule done…We all long either to meet the Bishop or better still his return. We will work the Sisterhood for him if he will only trust us and leave it to us as far as he can.”

She added: “It is hard at times to know when to speak + when to keep silent. However, it came to me very strongly after months of prayer + darkness, that the time had come for me to face matters with the Bishop.”

One week later, on January 2, 1924 Marie received a telegram from Bishop Shanahan, telling her to make arrangements to return to Ireland and get ready to enter the new novitiate, which he had acquired at Killeshandra. At the time she said no more about her reservations, but years later, Marie admitted that this was the hardest obedience of her life. She travelled home in March 1924, with Fr. Ronayne who was in poor health following a bout of malaria.

Her next letter to her mother was written on June 19, 1924, from the novitiate in Killeshandra. She said she was happy, but her searching continued.

The vocation to which Marie felt called was specifically related to health care. That required a lifestyle somewhat different to the regime envisaged by the Dominican Sisters in charge of the Killeshandra novitiate.

Marie never regretted going to Killeshandra, where her former companions from Calabar, Agnes Ryan, Elizabeth Ryan and Veronica Hasson, were also postulants. Marie completed eighteen months there, before finally deciding to leave.

She had now reached the age of thirty-three. The years ahead were to be even more insecure and riddled with many more difficulties than the years just ending.
In 1917, some months after Marie Martin had returned from nursing soldiers during the Battle of the Somme, she was praying in her local parish church at Monkstown, Co. Dublin. She asked God to show her what to do with her life. Suddenly there flashed across her mind the realisation that God was calling her to become a religious Sister. She was not at all sure what exactly this implied.

However, the next day she went to meet her boyfriend and explained to him that marriage was out of the question. In April 1917 she reached her twenty-fifth birthday. During the war she had seen the value of a life dedicated to medical and nursing work. But how did that fit in with her religious vocation?

A new young curate had arrived in her home parish of Monkstown, Fr. Tom Ronayne. Marie sought his direction. If that had not happened, perhaps the Medical Missionaries of Mary would never have been founded.

Who, then, was Fr. Tom Ronayne – the person who presented Marie Martin with a Douai Bible in 1917, probably the first personal copy she ever had? Why is his role in the history of MMM significant?

**Holy Ghost Colleges**

Tom Ronayne was born on June 21, 1887 at Dunmore in Co. Galway. When he reached the age of twelve, he was sent as a boarder to Rockwell College, run by the Holy Ghost Fathers – now known as the Spiritans. For health reasons his parents later transferred him to Blackrock College in Dublin. The Annals of the Order record a note on his first days in Rockwell:

“Precocious beyond his years, he went to the Superior and told him he wanted to be a Holy Ghost Father. The Superior’s reply was ‘You are too small.’

Tommie took the rebuff and went about his studies to prove both there and later in Blackrock that he had ability quite above the ordinary. He was among the first in his class all through his secondary studies and later he graduated with distinction in the Royal University. Though even then he was a frail young lad he was fond of sport and took part in all the games of both Colleges, developing an interest in games that remained with him all his life.

“The Priesthood was his goal and, not succeeding in entering the Holy Ghost Scholasticate, at the end of his secondary studies he entered Clonliffe College to study for the Priesthood in the Archdiocese of Dublin. From Clonliffe, he went to Maynooth in due course where he was a brilliant student, a keen musician and Choir Master and organist in that great institution.

“During this time, however, his health was far from robust. His heart was weak, and the college doctor took a grave view of his condition. He was warned against taking part in all games, forbidden to walk on gravel where it could be avoided and to climb stairs as little as possible.”

Following his ordination in 1913, Fr. Ronayne was sent on loan to the US Diocese of Sioux City, where he ministered for a few years before returning to Dublin.

**Monkstown**

In Saint Parick’s parish in Monkstown, Fr. Ronayne’s deep interest in the foreign missionary work of the church and his enthusiasm quickly appealed to Marie Martin. Around that time Fr. Ronayne was instrumental in introducing to one another the two priests who later founded the Missionary Society of St. Columban – first known as the Maynooth Mission to
China. One was Cork-born Fr. Ned Galvin who was back in Ireland after three years of missionary work in China, the other Fr. John Blowick, then a theology professor in Maynooth.

Fr. Roynane would have gladly joined them, but the Archbishop of Dublin would not release him from his commitment to the Diocese.

The Spiritan chronicler wrote:

“To the end of his days he eulogised those splendid pioneers of the Mission to China and never missed an opportunity of recounting those meetings in his father’s house in Sandymount where he maintained that the great mission had its birth.”

However, he accepted the decision of his Archbishop and considered the question of his joining the new venture for China closed to him.

Meanwhile Fr. Ronayne’s interest in the needs of the overseas Church, and Marie Martin’s dedication to those who were ill began to gradually coalesce. Soon the co-founders of the Missionary Society of St. Columban saw the need for women religious who would work as doctors and nurses in China. Lady Frances Moloney, a widow in her early forties, was among the audience at Dublin’s Mansion House when Fr. Blowick made a memorable appeal for a new congregation to be founded. Lady Moloney was one of the first to respond.

Fr. Ronayne had two women in mind who might also be interested. One was Agnes Ryan, a teacher in Monkstown. She had commenced medical studies at University College Dublin. The other was Marie Martin. When asked she replied that she would be deeply interested if a society of Sisters for medical work abroad were ever founded. Marie met Lady Frances Moloney in 1918. She felt that was the road she would follow.

At the beginning of 1919 Marie went to England to get more nursing experience and continued to correspond with Lady Moloney who by then had begun midwifery training at Dublin’s Holles Street Hospital.

Bishop Joseph Shanahan

Once again, Fr. Ronayne was instrumental in changing the course of Marie’s future. In 1920, the zealous Irish missionary, Fr. Joseph Shanahan CSSp, was nominated Bishop of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria. He received permission from the Irish Bishops to recruit priests for his mission on a five-year contract.

When Tom Ronayne was a student at Rockwell College, the young Fr. Shanahan had been teaching there. Once again he approached his Archbishop, pleading to be allowed to volunteer for Nigeria. This time his request to be released from Dublin was sanctioned. He began his preparations to leave Monkstown and sail to Nigeria with Fr. Shanahan in November 1920.

Meanwhile Fr. Ronayne arranged for Marie Martin to meet the future Bishop Shanahan on April 29, 1920. She offered to go and help in Nigeria as a lay person, putting whatever nursing skills she had at his disposal, and telling him she was starting a midwifery course and hoped to qualify early in 1921. By now, Agnes Ryan, already in her early forties, was a fourth year medical student. During a discussion in Holles Street, Agnes told Marie that she, too, would be interested in going to Nigeria.

Marie received her certificate in midwifery in February 1921, and was commended as ‘an excellent nurse, educated and refined.’ Marie celebrated her 29th birthday that April. A telegram arrived from Bishop Shanahan: ‘Urgently needed if you don’t mind facing things alone.’ Marie wired back: ‘Will come. Have a companion.’ Agnes Ryan had decided to leave her medical studies unfinished and go with Marie to Nigeria as a lay helper.

When they boarded the ship, Elmina, in Liverpool there was a wire with good wishes from Lady Frances Moloney, whose plans for the future work of the
Missionary Sisters of St. Columban were forging ahead. As they steamed out of Liverpool, Marie replied, telling Lady Frances how desperately hard she found it parting from home and from her mother. The loneliness, she said, was the worst.

On June 14, as they approached Calabar, Fr. Ronayne lined up the local boy scouts to provide a Guard of Honour for the newly arriving missionaries. To his consternation he discovered from the authorities that only the teachers for the mission school, and not any other ladies, would be allowed to disembark. He rushed on board, anxious to ensure that Marie and Agnes were aware that they were ‘the teachers for the mission school’. This was the first clue the two ladies got that their expectations of being involved in health care as lay volunteers could not be realised for a long time to come.

Early in 1922 Marie made a thirty-day retreat at Calabar, under the direction of Fr. Leen CSSp. It appears that she made private vows, consecrating her life to God, at the close of that retreat. We don’t know how Fr. Ronayne felt about that, as he was not a big fan of Fr. Leen. It is known that Fr. Ronayne was a close student of St. John of the Cross and of St. Bernard and St. Teresa of Avila. Abbot Marmion was another favourite of his, but Father Edward Leen’s books never found a place in his library.

Fr. Ronayne is remembered as a very severe critic of the earlier missionaries in Calabar. The Spiritan chronicler noted:

“Fr. Tommy found much to criticise in the method of his predecessors in Calabar. They were not sufficiently rigorous in the administration of the Sacraments. They won the hearts of the people by their kindly ways and Fr. Tommy thought their kind hearts rather than the dictates of moral theology governed their dealings with their flock. He was a rigorist almost to the realm of Jansenism. A reform must be affected and a reform was begun. Some abuses were indeed discovered but the remedies were more than drastic. The new missionary became unpopular for a while, but the desired goal was reached and not without many tribulations”.

On Easter Tuesday, April 18 1922, Bishop Shanahan visited Calabar to have a meeting with Fr. Ronayne and Fr. Leen, to which Marie Martin was invited. The meeting, referred to by the Bishop as the “Mission Council”, continued for two weeks – starting at 8 a.m. and continuing to 4 p.m. each day. The main topic was the foundation of a missionary congregation of women.

Again, Marie shared the news with her mother: “Two weeks were spent on Rules and Constitution. I was chosen as Foundress; it may pave the way for someone more worthy…”

But, despite the apparent clarity that emerged from that meeting, from then on Marie’s situation became increasingly marginal and insecure. Almost two years would pass before she and Bishop Shanahan would meet again. During this time much would happen to change the plans that had been discussed with Marie in Calabar.

Killeshandra

On January 2, 1924 Marie received a telegram from Bishop Shanahan, telling her to make arrangements to return to Ireland and get ready to enter the novitiate which he had acquired at Killeshandra. At the time she said no more about her reservations, but years later, Marie admitted that this was the hardest obedience of her life. She travelled home in March 1924. Fr. Ronayne who was in poor health following a bout of malaria and general nervous exhaustion travelled with her.

Author Desmond Forristal in ‘The Second Burial of Bishop Shanahan’ says the Bishop, when he met her in Ireland, was somewhat disturbed to find that Marie seemed to have lost some of her zest for the work. He was inclined to blame this on Fr. Ronayne who was still her director, and who would have had opportunities to influence her on the voyage home. He appointed Fr. Edward Leen, now based in Dublin, as his representative in all matters relating to the convent but gave Fr. Ronayne the post of convent chaplain, residing in the gate-lodge of Killeshandra, with the celebration of daily Mass as his main duty. However the Bishop wrote a warning note to Mother Colmcille, prioress of the Dominicans who were responsible for forming the new Congregation, saying “the less the chaplain or any outside person has to do with the Aspirants the better for them. Use your own discretion.”

Marie completed eighteen months in Killeshandra before finally deciding to leave. She had now reached the age of thirty-three. The vocation to which she felt called was specifically related to health care. That required a life style very different to the regime envisaged by the Dominican Sisters in charge of the Killeshandra novitiate. Eventually when she left on the March 8, 1926, it was Fr. Pat Whitney who collected her and drove to the home of some friends until...
her family could come and take her home to Monks-town. Her decision to leave was regretted by Bishop Shanahan, though they continued to respect one another deeply.

Fr. Ronayne became quite a thorn in the side of Bishop Shanahan's role in Killeshandra. He began to set himself up as defender of the local Bishop Finegan, impressing on him that he, Bishop Finegan, was the ecclesiastical superior as the document from Rome authorising the opening of Killenshandra was addressed to him and not to Bishop Shanahan. This led to great strain. Obviously, Fr. Ronayne lived with the weight of this for the next three decades. In 1957 he wrote to Mother Mary Martin confiding to her side of those painful events explaining, “Dr. Finegan regarded me as his personal agent to see that everything was done according to Canon Law”.

Writing about those difficulties, Fr. Desmond Forristal is antipathetic towards Fr. Ronayne: “His nature was such that he could not refrain from interfering in everybody else's business, always with the best of intentions. He had never yet met a soul that would not profit by his direction or a situation that would not be improved by his intervention.”

But in a letter to Mother Xavier OP, Bishop Shanahan, despite his sense of frustration, had this to say of Fr. Ronayne: “God permits that his highly sensitive nature should suffer for and bring great blessings on any cause he embraces...he cannot see from most people's viewpoint; and the result is more mental agony in having to do what his own mind tells him could be done more effectively some other way – his own way in preference. Well, I ought to know something of Father Tom's difficulties – but he's the best, sincerest and most loyal man and priest on earth”.

Nigeria Again

The solution was for Bishop Shanahan to request Fr. Ronayne to return to Nigeria and become his secretary at Onitsha. By now the Bishop's sight was failing badly. Desmond Forristal notes: “Ronayne left Killeshandra and returned to Nigeria, to take up his new duties as Shanahan's assistant and secretary. While he himself was in no doubt about the reason for his recall, everyone else thought it a sign of Shanahan's confidence and esteem that he should want him as his secretary. Even in such a situation, Shanahan respected his good intentions and did nothing that would damage his reputation.”

The chronicler of the Spiritans wrote that as the years went on, Father Tommy became less of a rigorist. With the passage of time he mellowed. He filled many positions of responsibility, both in the days of Bishop Shanahan and later. He was always a man of prayer, spending long hours in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. The contemplative life had a big attraction for him. His sense of humour was remarkable.

In 1938, when he was 51 years of age, his thoughts once again turned to the question of joining the Holy Ghost Order. Permission was gladly given. A kind old French priest was appointed his Novice Master to complete his Novitiate in Nigeria. The chronicler remarks: “With such a master and such a pupil, one often wondered who was the dirigé!” Around that time Fr. Ronayne wrote something that gives us a glimpse into his self-knowledge: “I am a Holy Ghost Father but that does not change human nature”.

His last years were spent teaching one of his favourite subjects, Church History, to seminarians. He was greatly admired by his students for his learning and piety. He acted as Spiritual Adviser to the Seminarians at the Bigard Memorial Seminary at Enugu. In 1963 he returned to Maynooth to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood, where high tributes were paid to him.

During his forty years of missionary work, Fr. Ronayne was privileged to witness fantastic growth of the Church in Iboland. When he started in Calabar there were only twenty-three priests to cater for the needs of a territory that subsequently became thirteen dioceses with flourishing parishes and innumerable schools and colleges. The part he played in this development is well recognised.

Visits to MMM

When he had leave in Ireland he visited Mother Mary at Drogheda on several occasions. In 1958 he spent three weeks at our Motherhouse giving conferences to the Sisters. At the same time he had long talks with Mother Mary – especially about the need to have native priests, sisters and other medical personnel trained to be ready to take over if missionaries had to leave Africa.

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While Mother Mary did not have a lot of contact with him in those years, she must often have recalled the key role he played in the early years when she needed guidance and friendship. He was the one who helped her shape her dream of doing medical work in a missionary context, and supported her in holding on to that dream when the future was impossible to predict.

To the end of his life, Fr. Ronayne cherished a deep affection and high admiration for the members of MMM and for the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary. It is also worth noting that Fr. Hugh Kelly SJ, who became spiritual director to Marie Martin from the early 1930s onwards, was a close friend of Fr. Tom Ronayne, who helped Fr. Kelly to understand what the life of the overseas missions involved and its demands.

A week before Christmas in 1965, Fr. Tom Ronayne fell ill and was taken to the mission hospital at Adazi. The chronicler of the Spiritans tells us:

“The heart that had given signs of radical weakness sixty-five years earlier went through a tremendous struggle. His agony lasted for the whole week with short intervals of painless quiet. He was in the care of the Sisters of St. John of God, who with an incomparable lady doctor, Miriam Brady, did all things possible to make his final passage easy. They were joined by a Holy Rosary Sister, a close relation of his, Sister Mary Chrysostom McLoughlin. He received all the last Rites with the joy that accompanies a real home coming. On Christmas Day at 7 o’clock he received Holy Communion. Two hours afterwards he peacefully handed his great priestly soul to God, to join among others whom he loved, that great missionary who brought him to Nigeria forty-five years before, who himself had died on Christmas Day back in 1943 – Bishop Joseph Shanahan”.

Fr. Ronayne was buried in the grounds of the Cathedral in Onitsha overlooking the great Niger river. On January 7 1966, Mother Mary drove to Kimmage Manor to attend the Mass of remembrance for him. The following day she would have to attend the funeral in Drogheda of one of her earliest companions – the greatly loved Sister M. St. John Keane who had died unexpectedly in Drogheda the previous day. There were rumblings of trouble in Nigeria – trouble that would shortly erupt in the Biafran War. What thoughts must have occupied her mind on that journey to Kimmage Manor!

What if?

What if she had never met Fr. Tom Ronayne? What if he had not directed her as a young woman to study the Scriptures and the works of Dom Columba Marmion? What if he had not intervened back in 1920 to direct her to volunteer with Bishop Shanahan in Nigeria rather than Lady Frances Moloney in China? What if he had not been there to welcome her on arrival in Calabar in 1921 and explain the change in Bishop Shanahan’s plans regarding medical work? What if he had not been there to support her during that most difficult voyage home from Nigeria in 1924? What if he had not been Chaplain during her time in Killeshandra? What if he had not been a friend of Fr. Hugh Kelly?

The missionary zeal, the life, the vision and the encouragement of Fr. Tom Ronayne had influenced her early life choices in a defining way. All along, he believed her dream of founding a medical missionary congregation could come true. The passing of her old friend and director marked the end of an era.

MARIE HELENA MARTIN

We are grateful to Brother Ignatius Curry CSSp, Spiritan Archivist, for access to materials about Fr. Tom Ronayne.
'Manuscripts and Memories' is the title given by the American Jesuit poet, Michael Earls, to his book about great scholars who became his friends. Among them was Charles Robinson, a fellow student at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts in 1895.

The young Mr. Robinson had already achieved much in his 25 years. He first worked in London as a Fleet Street journalist reporting for the *New York Sun*. He was known, even then, to be a ‘walking encyclopedia yet an affable companion’.

Later in life, the same young journalist played a crucial role in the foundation of the Medical Missionaries of Mary, as evidenced by a trawl through manuscripts in the Archives at our Motherhouse. Our older Sisters have memories of how his wisdom and friendship guided our foundress, Mother Mary Martin, through the delicate beginnings of our Congregation.

**Dublin Born**

Charles Robinson was born in Herbert Street, Dublin, on April 26, 1870 to Nugent Robinson and Jeanette Neville Robinson. His father was a well known Catholic writer. After moving to live in New York, he became one of the founders of *Collier’s Weekly*. His literary interests influenced Charles, the second of his three sons.

After his assignment in Fleet Street, Charles worked for two years as Assistant Editor of the *North American Review*, one of the best-known magazines of the time. His rooms in New York were across the street from the headquarters of the Commissariat of the Holy Land in the United States. A close friendship sprung up between Charles and Fr. Godfrey Schilling OFM, who was the Commissary.

Charles joined the Third Order of St. Francis. Later he followed his Franciscan vocation further, becoming a Friar, at St. Bonaventure College, Allegany NY in 1896, and taking the name Brother Paschal. His talents were developed as he studied and worked with the Franciscans for the next thirty years. He taught English Literature at St. Bonaventure’s before going to Rome to complete his studies for priesthood. He was ordained on December 21, 1901.

**International Scholarship**

His writings appeared in many learned reviews. He also contributed generously to the Catholic Encyclopedia, and worked for the Franciscan Research headquarters at Quaracchi in Italy. In 1909 he made his first extensive trip to the Holy Land, to Palestine, Syria, Egypt and beyond. He became well known for his scholarship on Franciscan and medieval history, eventually being appointed to the chair of medieval history at the Catholic University of America.

In 1919, following the end of World War I, together with professors of other universities, Fr. Paschal was asked to serve on the Educational and Economic Mission at the Peace Conference of Versailles. At the same time, the Holy See invited him to sit in on discussions concerning the Holy Land, for which he had a deep love and an interest in the work of the Franciscan Custodians of the Holy Places. He also took part in the work of the League of Nations.

Not surprisingly, after the Peace Conference, the Holy See chose him as Apostolic Visitor to the Holy Land. For the next ten years, this very delicate work drew upon his versatile talents and gentle nature. Franciscan Annals record that ‘he kept his hand on the pulse of the political situation in the Holy Land and was able to smooth out many difficulties in that ever turbulent field of mixed races and multiple religions’. They note ‘one could rely on him to do the right thing under all circumstances.’
In 1927 he was consecrated Titular Archbishop of Tyana by Pope Pius XI. Two years later he was given the very delicate task of investigating differences which had arisen in Malta, then under British rule, between the Prime Minister, Lord Strickland and ecclesiastical authorities and involving Mussolini’s fascist Italy. His masterly report led to a peaceful settlement.

Ireland Again

His appointment as Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland on November 27, 1929 was also considered a delicate one. Ireland was still in need of healing from the civil war that ended just seven years earlier. There had been no Apostolic Nuncio in Ireland for three hundred years since the time of Cromwell.

It was a winter’s night when Archbishop Paschal Robinson arrived in Dublin. The Pro-Cathedral was thronged as the people, led by Archbishop Edward Byrne, gave him the warmest welcome anyone could desire. Despite his often expressed wish to retire to some quiet monastery to spend his last days in peace and prayer, he was nevertheless happy to be back in the city of his birth.

It was here that the experienced and erudite scholar would serve the Church for the last nineteen years of his life. During that period, his role in enabling the foundation of the Medical Missionaries of Mary was paramount.

A Friend in Need

The friendship that had been experienced by so many others throughout his years of service, was now to extend to our foundress, and – as the years unfolded – to our young Congregation. When the new Nuncio arrived in Dublin, our foundress, then known as Marie Martin, had been more than ten years trying to figure out what steps she should take to bring medical assistance to the mission fields. She had worked in Nigeria in the early 1920s and had seen the enormous needs. Her efforts since then had been frustrated by obstacles and dogged by ill health. She later wrote about her first meeting with the Nuncio in 1933:

‘After my long illness in 1932, I was asked to try once more to do something to bring medical assistance to the Mission fields. I contemplated going to Rome to learn the wishes of the Holy Father regarding the question of religious doing all branches of medical work, especially the care of Mother and Child, and to my joy I remembered this was not necessary, Rome had come to Ireland in the person of His Excellency Most Rev. Dr. Paschal Robinson, and at the Nunciature I would learn the wishes of our Holy Father. Having received an introduction to His Excellency, who graciously granted me an interview, I told His Excellency of the work I contemplated for the Mission. Most Rev. Dr. Paschal Robinson read the little sketch I had written in Africa in 1921 and said it was an inspiration from God. His Excellency was most sympathetic and understanding, giving me his blessing and a promise of prayers, advising me to wait patiently before taking any steps to become a religious until the Holy Father had spoken on the matter of religious doing all branches of medicine. His Excellency added, with a smile: ‘This may be ten years, or it may be one hundred years hence, but God will accept your desire’.

A Loving Father

Later she recalled: ‘All His Excellency’s wide knowledge and experience were ever at our disposal and no matter what our shortcomings, I felt I could approach the Nuncio as a loving Father’. And so she did, again and again and again.

Paschal Robinson became for Marie Martin the kind of friend to whom you relate all your movements, with whom you share all the happenings in your life, all the developments in your plans, the advisor whom you feel you can pester, even while you reverence their knowledge and high office.

He didn't seem to mind one bit. He was a very busy man. But he took on her project to establish a medical missionary congregation with enthusiasm and dedication to match her own. When she thanked him for
the initial interview he replied: ‘I trust you will not hesitate to call on me for whatever aid I can give in connection with the very difficult task you are so anxious to undertake.’ He meant it and she knew that.

With hindsight we can see the amazing unfolding of Divine Providence! The Secretary to the Nuncio was the young Monsignor Antonio Riberti (later Cardinal), born in Monte Carlo and appointed to Dublin in 1930. He was aware of all the discussions and negotiations. By 1933, Marie Martin had made plans to help the monks of Glenstal who were having domestic difficulties regarding their new boys’ boarding school. The Nuncio was informed that Dom Gerard OSB, Prior of Glenstal, was also an important figure in the future plans.

The News everyone awaited

February 11 1936 brought the news they had all been awaiting from Rome. *Constans ac Sedula*, the decree permitting women religious to practice all branches of medicine, including obstetrics and surgery, was published. The Pope called for the establishment of new groups of religious to bring health care to mission lands. It is hard to believe that this was not sufficient to raise all barriers and ecclesiastical obstacles! But, sadly, it was not.

To establish a religious congregation, it was essential to have a Bishop who would welcome the initiative in his Diocese. Where appropriate, the Nuncio gave Marie Martin introductions. Otherwise, he gave valuable advice. Initially, every door she knocked on was quickly closed. First Cashel, then Cork said no. It was expected that Waterford would be the same, and it was known that Dublin at that time was a ‘no go’ area for new religious communities.

The fatherly relationship Marie Martin developed with the Nuncio is revealed in her correspondence with him about these refusals.

They decide to petition Rome. The Nuncio borrows a copy of Constitutions of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary for her, written in French. In thanking him, she says:

‘My only fear is that there is anything I should do that I leave undone... If you see anything I should do for the little infant society please let me know and I shall do so immediately, as things are at present it is hard to know exactly how far to go.’

They are corresponding every few days now. She tells him she has had another letter from the great missionary, Bishop Joseph Shanahan, who is supporting her plans. She is anxious to get things moving as quickly as possible:

‘You can understand how anxious I am to follow the Instruction received from Rome and to have the work taken up by a Bishop in Ireland so as to allow the work to grow as rapidly as possible owing to the urgent need there is for medical help on the mission field, especially in the Vicariate of Calabar, S. Nigeria, where we have our first field of activity, where the hospital and a leper settlement await our first unit.’

In Drogheda at the opening of the Hospital Extension in 1942 Dr. Paschal Robinson was present, as on other important occasions pictured below.
Not Hopeful

Things are not looking hopeful. They talk of starting as a lay group, maybe going to Africa in the Autumn of 1937 and beginning the work, with a view to forming as a religious society later on. Marie says she will contact Monsignor Joseph Moynagh in Calabar about this proposal.

However, some of the early candidates were still pursuing studies in nursing. Marie would need a house in Dublin as a base for them. For several weeks she keeps the Nuncio informed of houses for sale and houses they might rent. Eventually a house at Rosemount in Booterstown is located. They would negotiate renting it for a year with a view to purchase if found suitable. All is going well, but then at the last minute the owner dies suddenly! Back to square one. The ever supportive Nuncio is given a blow-by-blow account of it all. He also takes time to look at the draft of a recruitment pamphlet needed for future vocations and fund raising.

Then, Monsignor Riberi re-enters the scene. The timing was perfect! In 1934 he had left Dublin, was consecrated Archbishop and appointed Apostolic Delegate with responsibility for the missions in East and West Africa. He resided in Mombasa, Kenya.

In October 1936, Archbishop Riberi visited Dr. Paschal Robinson and enquired if he was still in touch with the Miss Martin who was intent on founding a medical missionary congregation. Archbishop Robinson picked up the phone and called Marie, asking her to come immediately to the Nunciature.

There and then it was decided that the new Congregation should have its beginnings in Africa, at Calabar where Monsignor Joseph Moynagh had responsibility. They all knew that he was extremely supportive. His sister, later Sister M. Joseph, was among the small nucleus of women who had joined Marie Martin in Glenstal.

Archbishop Riberi was returning to Africa immediately. He promised to expedite matters in Rome and in Calabar.

Flurry of Activity

This changed everything! The succeeding weeks were a flurry of activity as the first small group prepared to sail for Nigeria – all of which has been well documented elsewhere.

Once again, the reassuring words from the Nuncio must have cheered the hearts of the pioneers: ‘I shall of course be glad to do all I can to aid you…’ By now the Auditor at the Nunciature was Monsignor Giuseppe Bearzotti. He was asked to view the property at Rosemount, and gave a very favourable report on it. However, the situation was very delicate, because establishing a house for religious would require the permission of the Archbishop of Dublin. The future foundress did not have a religious congregation as yet. If she had, there was no expectation that permission would be forthcoming.

On October 13 1936, she shares her anxieties with her friend at the Nunciature:

‘On leaving the Nunciature this morning, I felt we had become very depressed about the prospects of MMM on reviewing our discussion. However, I cannot now see any new difficulty has arisen... After all, the crux of our problem has been that we have had always to bear in mind two things which for so long have seemed incompatible. Firstly, to get our work started in accordance with the ‘de Propaganda Fide’ and secondly to accomplish this in such a way as to cause no clash with or embarrassment to the Hierarchy.’

In the succeeding weeks every cable and letter from Monsignor Moynagh is shared with the Nuncio. She waves Archbishop Riberi off at the pier on his voyage back to Africa, and tells the Nuncio that she hopes to follow him by November 25. In fact, it was not until after Christmas that they were able to sail. Monsignor Bearzotti was at the ship to see them off.

On 30 Dec 1936, Marie writes to Archbishop Robinson from the RMS Abosso. ‘All went well last night and again today. We got all the luggage safely through. We are well provided for with two priests on board.’

The Dream is Realised

The dramatic developments of early 1937 in Nigeria are told elsewhere. The foundress, gravely ill in hospital in Port Harcourt, writes to Archbishop Robinson on April 1 as if there is no crisis. She tells him that Monsignor Moynagh sent her a wire the previous day saying all petitions to Rome have been granted. She will relate all to him when she has the privilege and happiness of visiting him again.
A few days later, on April 7, she thanks him for his very welcome latest letter with Easter greetings, and gives him the great news:

‘The Medical Missionaries of Mary came into being on Low Sunday when Monsignor Moynagh held the first ceremony and professed me in hospital. It was all so arranged by His Excellency Monsignor Riberi, who said there was to be no delay’. She says her health is slowly improving and she hopes to see him early in May.

That was only the first step. Many difficulties had yet to be overcome, through all of which Archbishop Robinson remained a staunch support. Mother Mary Martin later recalled:

‘At every function celebrating a further step in the development of the work of the Congregation, His Excellency honoured us either by his presence in person or by sending a representative from the Nunciature.’

Her last letter to him was on August 13 1948 while she was confined to bed with shingles: ‘I know Your Excellency will pray more than ever for me and I trust continue to help and teach me how to found and govern the Congregation.’

**A Time to Mourn**

His unexpected death came just two weeks after that, at the Nunciature at 4 a.m. on August 27, 1948. He had worked the previous day till evening, when he became ill. He had ignored a chill he got some days previously, not thinking it necessary to interrupt his work.

The whole of Ireland mourned. The Franciscan community worldwide, the Church and the academic circles he so influenced, all expressed their grief. He was given a State funeral but his wishes to be buried as a simple Franciscan among his brothers at Glasnevin Cemetery were honoured. His grave lay close to that of Charles Stuart Parnell, whose famous trial he had covered as a young Fleet Street journalist.

Mother Mary Martin wrote with much feeling:

‘His Excellency’s death is a source of immense sorrow and tremendous loss to us all. Although his time was so occupied with all the important work of Nuncio Apostolic to Ireland, he was so gracious with the disposal of his precious time to counsel and encourage us, nothing was too small or insignificant when it was in any way to further our religious life or the work of the missions… We feel sure he will continue to watch over us from Heaven.’

She recalled his last visit to our Motherhouse at Drogheda on Pentecost Sunday in 1948. It was ‘but a short three months ago, during my absence on Visitation in East Africa, when His Excellency gave the following address to the Sisters:

‘It is the first time I have been out of Dublin for three years, as I have been ill. I have taken such an interest in Mother Mary and the Medical Missionaries of Mary that I am glad my first visit is to Drogheda, and I am glad to see that since my last visit here there has been such a wonderful growth in the buildings, but more especially in the numbers. I was very sorry I could not come before Mother Mary went away, but for various reasons with which I will not trouble you now, I could not come. I am sorry I have to leave you again tomorrow, but I must get back to Dublin… Next time I come, if God spares me, this place will all be covered with buildings… Leave the future in the hands of God and His blessings will continue to pour down on you. I am too tired to say any more now.’

A few months earlier, in a hand-written letter to Mother Mary he described himself as ‘one who has been deeply interested in the welfare of the Medical Missionaries of Mary from the outset.’

Writing in *The Crusader’s Almanac* Fr. Paschal Kinsel OFM noted that in the sudden death of Archbishop Paschal Robinson, the Holy Father lost his longest serving Apostolic Nuncio, the Franciscan Order its most distinguished son. The world at large lost a profound scholar and kindly gentleman who had walked on equal level with the intellectual giants, leading statesmen and churchmen of half a century. He was a real Franciscan who never lost the common touch, but was honoured in death as one of the great men of all time.

The Medical Missionaries of Mary will always be profoundly grateful to God to have had such a man as our helper and our friend.
Born in 1885, the outstanding potential of the young Edward Leen was well recognised by his teachers at Rockwell College. Later when he joined the Spiritan community and studied at Chevilly in France, in Rome at the Gregorian University and at University College Dublin, terms like *summa cum laude* were used by his examiners. In 1919 he was one of a small team who launched the first issue of the *Missionary Annals*. Contributions from his pen made the publication an instant success. He became well-known in educational circles. His later writings revealed a man whose thinking was ahead of the Second Vatican Council. Writing in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* he reflected on the priesthood of the laity. Some sensed that a new wind was being blown by the Spirit in his teaching. He was not unacquainted with controversy over some of his ideas.

It was overwork that forced him to take a break from academic life. The great missionary, Bishop Joseph Shanahan, persuaded his superiors that an assignment to Nigeria would be just the cure! In November 1920 they sailed for Calabar. Fr. Leen was then aged thirty-five. The time spent with Bishop Shanahan marked a new outlook as he discovered the latter’s vision of evangelisation.

At the same time, he encountered a young Irish woman, Marie Martin, who arrived at the mission in Calabar in June 1921. She had just turned twenty-nine. She had a hunch that she should establish a congregation of religious sisters devoted to medical work. It was her pursuit of this dream that had brought her to Nigeria. She was a lay woman, but for expedience they all referred to her as ‘Sister Mary’.

Fr. Leen was soon caught up in exploring God’s Providence in her life.

Early in 1922 he agreed to direct a retreat for her. The evening conference on the fourth day covered the mystery of suffering, a theme to which he would return in his future writing. He told Marie that those who look on at others in some agony of mind or body are awed. If they love the sufferer, they would willingly enter into the person’s being and help them to resist it. Suffering puts a kind of consecration on a person. We are bewildered and do not understand it.

Marie, who had nursed the wounded through the worst battles of the Great War just a few years earlier, could well put context on such thoughts. These reflections can only have fuelled her determination to get on with her medical missionary dream. At the close of the retreat, she consecrated her life to God, taking private vows.

She returned again and again to think about the themes covered by Fr. Leen during this retreat. Later that year she wrote to him: “I often use your conferences, they will always be of untold value to me, they lift me right up, not to emotional feelings but to truth and love, courage to face the Cross and darkness if it is God’s Will for the rest of my life.”

Years later she would tell us: “Always be at the disposal of God’s Will through the circumstances He sends, this is real holiness”. For her, like Fr. Leen, circumstances were always part of God’s Providence.

After Easter in 1922, at a gathering lasting two weeks in Calabar, ideas about the need for a missionary congregation of women became more
clear. Constitutions were drawn up. Present at these meetings with Bishop Shanahan were Fr. Leen, Fr. Tom Ronayne (then a volunteer priest from Dublin Archdiocese who later joined the Spiritans), and Marie Martin. She was seen as the future foundress. Fr. Leen remarked on the four personalities:

“The members of the group differed one from the other in many respects – in temperament, experience, education, mentality – in almost all that contributes to impart psychological stamp to a human being. They were drawn together and unified in one particular; they all shared in an absorbing passion for the welfare of souls, for the thronging multitudes that peopled the land of southern Nigeria.”

Marie also commented on the foursome. In a letter to Fr. Leen on 28 April 1922, she said:

“The Bishop, you and Father Ronayne and myself have a very close tie in Our Lord, we should be united in all our prayers and works as I believe we are.”

Later on, Fr. Leen earned the reputation of being austere, demanding, living on some plane apart. Maybe that went with the territory in academic institutions in Ireland. But Marie experienced nothing of that aloofness. Their discourse was not confined to the spiritual realm. There were missions to be run. They discussed stocks of linen and soap, and how the grass around the school needed to be cut. He would arrange with the Supervisor of the prison to send up twenty prisoners to do that for her.

He was a frequent visitor to ‘The Convent’ where Marie and three companions from Ireland resided, all of them laywomen. There he would learn to darn socks and get tips on baking in return for his advice on the revised Catechism.

By August 1922, Fr. Leen had returned to Ireland. Marie found his departure hard. Three times she told him so. On 21 July 1922 she wrote:

“I must tell you in sincere truth, I feel your departure very much but it is a great source of joy and consolation to know we are all three united in the sanctification of our souls and the service of our Divine Master.”

A month later, on 15 August, she wrote:

“I need not tell you how anxious I am to hear from you, it was harder for you than any of them to leave Nigeria, as I believe if it were God’s Will you would like to give your life to these people. I felt your and the Bishop’s departure very much but such is the Will of God. You had prepared me for everything so I made the offering while I was strong for the time of weakness.”

They corresponded frequently throughout 1922 and 1923 about all the difficulties and threats to the success of their fragile scheme. Marie remained in Calabar until 1924. Historian John Manton speaks of this period of her life as an essential failure to achieve her goals. But for her these years were only a step on a long road of exploring God’s Providence.

The next step was dictated by Bishop Shanahan. His plans to establish the new religious congregation in Nigeria had changed. Instead, that would happen in Ireland at Killeshandra. Dominican Sisters would be given responsibility for the initial formation of the new recruits. Marie was not at all convinced that this was the way she should go. But she bowed to Bishop Shanahan’s request and left Nigeria early in 1924 to join the Novitiate of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary. Fr. Leen was appointed Spiritual Director to the group.

Fr. Tom Ronayne had become ill in Nigeria and travelled to Ireland with Marie. He spent long periods at Killeshandra off and on. He had been Marie’s director before either of them had gone to Nigeria. When they first met back in 1917, it was his zeal for
overseas missions that had moulded her vision into the concept of a medical missionary endeavour. Now in 1924 the web of circumstances that were part of God’s Providence became quite dense.

In Killeshandra Marie felt she was in the wrong place. Fr. Leen and Bishop Shanahan, were dismayed at the possibility that she might leave. They saw her as a key person in the new foundation. Fr. Ronayne was more open to the idea that she might be right to go. But they advised her to complete her canonical Novitiate year before deciding. She agreed.

Marie looked at every possibility. She was very drawn to prayer. Life in Killeshandra didn’t give enough time. She thought a contemplative life, praying for the missions like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, might be the best way to go. Fr. Leen was not long about disabusing her of this notion. In an eight-point letter, he went to great lengths to spell out what a delusion she was under:

“This drawing to the interior life is such as every soul that is sincere feels... It is a constant and ordinary temptation to mistake it for a call to the purely contemplative life. I felt it myself and thought that my vocation was to become a Trappist...You have neither the mental or physical qualities that would make a good contemplative... this is not written to persuade you to stay on in Killeshandra or in any other place, as what I have said holds good whatever you decide to do...my own view, which I submit with all reserve, is that you are allowing your mind to be diverted from the present... by the wanderings of your imagination and that you are wasting a good deal of energy and valuable time on what I might term ‘supernatural building of castles in the air’... This may seem to you a very hard letter – it is really sympathetic.”

His opinion didn’t deflect her from exploring that route. She left Killeshandra in March 1926 and later asked the Carmelite community at Hampton in Dublin to accept her. Although the community voted in her favour, the Prioress, Mother Dympna – like Fr. Leen – felt her calling was elsewhere.

She remained friends with Fr. Leen. In 1927 he still addressed her ‘Dear Sister Mary’, commenting, ‘pardon my mode of address... I am afraid that it is as such that you will always be for me to the end as I have known you from the beginning.’ In 1931 he reassured her that she need have no anxiety. He shared with her his own journey, and some of his papers.

The last letter he wrote to her was on 8 December 1941, just three years before his untimely death in 1944. In 1937 she had eventually succeeded in founding the Medical Missionaries of Mary and was becoming widely known as Mother Mary Martin. Writing from Kimmage Manor, he told her that the forthcoming issue of Studies would deal with the medical aspect of missionary work. He expressed some frustration that “This part of the article was longer but had to be cut through exigencies of space.”

Exigencies of space prevent us now from exploring further the remarkable friendship between Mother Mary Martin and Fr. Edward Leen. Their spirituality was expressed in a language that is rather different to that used by spiritual writers today. But in their separate ways each of them has left us a spiritual legacy of enormous wealth.

The author is indebted to Spiritan Archivist, Brother Ignatius Curry CSSp, for access to biographical data on Edward Leen and correspondence to him from Marie Martin, and also to MMM Archivist, Sister Catherine Dwyer, for access to correspondence from Edward Leen to Marie Martin and to his retreat notes of 1922.
Diary of the week of MMM Foundation

**Wednesday, March 3, 1937:** Mother Mary got a heart attack at 11 pm Miss Powell and Miss D’Arcy (two nurses from Ireland helping in the mission hospital) and Doctor Dunleavy were called. During the night, at Mother’s own wish, Monsignor Moynagh was sent for and he came and gave her the last Sacraments. She feared she was dying and said good-bye to the Sisters. She was happy and at peace.

**Thursday, March 4, 1937:** Mother Mary feeling a little better today. Doctor Dunleavy came to see her. He himself was not feeling well and went to bed after doing the Dispensary.

**Friday, March 5, 1937:** His Excellency Archbishop Riberi came to visit Mother Mary and gave her great hopes of an early reply from Rome. Doctor Dunleavy very ill. Nurse D’Arcy stayed up with him all night.

**Saturday, March 6, 1937:** His Excellency Archbishop Riberi left this morning. Monsignor Moynagh went with him as far as Emekuku and brought back Doctor Noeth, a German mission doctor, to see Mother Mary and Doctor Dunleavy.

**Sunday, March 7, 1937:** Doctor Noeth advised sending Doctor Dunleavy to the Government Hospital at Port Harcourt. He was taken there that same day.

**Tuesday, March 9, 1937:** We got a terrible shock today when news came from Port Harcourt that Doctor Dunleavy had died. R.I.P. The remains were taken from Port Harcourt to Anua.

**Wednesday, March 10, 1937:** Solemn Requiem Mass at 8 am for Doctor Dunleavy and the funeral took place afterwards. He was buried in the mission compound.

**Sunday, March 14, 1937:** Mother Mary running a temperature of 102 today and feeling very weak.

**Monday, March 15, 1937:** Mother Mary very ill today, still running a high temperature.

**Tuesday, March 16, 1937:** Mother Mary still very ill. We wired Doctor Noeth to come, which he did in the evening. He gave us good hope.

**Wednesday, March 17, 1937** (St. Patrick’s Day) Mother Mary was very poorly today and Doctor Noeth had to return to his mission hospital.

**Monday, March 22, 1937:** Monsignor Moynagh wired for Doctor Noeth again although Mother Mary is feeling a bit better but very weak.

**Tuesday, March 23, 1937:** Doctor Noeth came today and arranged for Mother to go to the Government Hospital in Port Harcourt on Thursday. He advises she goes home.

**Thursday, March 25, 1937:** Holy Thursday and Feast of the Annunciation. Father McGettrick came over about 5.15 a.m. and brought Mother Mary Holy Communion. He came back later with a car and they set out for Port Harcourt, the future Sister M. Magdalen going with them. Doctor Noeth joined them en route at Aba. When the hospital doctor, Doctor Braithwaite, saw the patient he said she must go home on the next boat.

**Friday, March 26, 1937:** Good Friday: We went to the ceremonies in the mission. All is so quiet and still after the anxious events of the last few weeks. We are wondering how Mother Mary is today.

**Saturday, March 27, 1937:** Holy Saturday: Monsignor Moynagh came from Calabar. He was very anxious about Mother and said he would consult Archbishop Riberi who was in Onitsha about cabling Rome regarding the petitions. The whole suspense and anxiety is caused by the fact that she would have to leave for home before the reply came. Monsignor said he would not take the responsibility of keeping her if the doctors advised against it.

**Monday, March 29, 1937:** Easter Monday: We are still in suspense, no news of Mother, no news from Rome. The hospital and dispensary are closed, everything very still and quiet.

Then came great news and jubilation. The reply from Rome has come to Monsignor Moynagh, all petitions are granted. Laus Deo. The Congregation was to be canonically erected, Mother Mary professed, and her two companions to do six months canonical Novitiate.

**Wednesday, March 31, 1937:** Easter Wednesday: A wire came from Mother Mary today to say she had received good news from Monsignor Moynagh. We recited the Magnificat and Te Deum.

**Friday, April 2, 1937:** Easter Friday: Monsignor Moynagh arrived from Calabar today. He was very happy over the good news from Rome. He said he could not give any decision on anything until he saw Mother Mary. He was going to Port Harcourt next day and was anxious for her Profession straight away. We said it might be possible that we should not be there owing to the difficulty of transport and accommodation.

**Saturday, April 3, 1937:** Easter Saturday: Monsignor Moynagh, Father Cullen, Mother M. Fidelis and Mother M. Bernard of the Society of the Holy Child, went to Port Harcourt today.

**Sunday, April 4, 1937:** Low Sunday: Mother Mary was professed today in Port Harcourt Hospital. MMM is canonically erected. Te Deum laudamus.
My dearest Mother,

With joy I write to tell you the good news. MMM has been erected and I was professed on Low Sunday. The infant society was born in a hospital. By kind permission of Dr. Braithwaite, Monsignor Moynagh had Mass and the beautiful little ceremony. Nothing could have pleased me more, it was so hidden and simple. I took for my name Sister Mary of the Incarnation. Miss O’Rourke and Miss Moynagh have been asked to make great acts of detachment for they were not present at the ceremony. The Reverend Mother (Mother M. Fidelis SHCJ) and our Novice Mistress had to be there, also two of the Killeshandra nuns came for it.

It is naturally a great consolation after all these years to have the approval of the Holy Father, the Church, and to be a spouse of Christ in a medical missionary society. Now, the great responsibility begins and the hard work, but I shall with God’s help go forward as I did in the past with absolute trust and confidence in God’s loving Providence renewed in courage and strength knowing He will complete the work He has begun.
Medical Missionaries of Mary

Rooted and Founded in Love

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