

Sisters of Service: Breaking Free of the Monastic Tradition To Serve the Abandoned Ones

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As a particular field within the discipline of Canadian history, women's organizations have only recently been accepted as a topic of major research importance. Even more rare was any extensive study of women's work within the structures of the major religious denominations. As Ruth Compton Brouwer has pointed out, even historians who were committed to women's history gave these women little attention, unless their involvement with religion served "as a way-station on the road to feminist consciousness. Personal spirituality and transcendent concerns have been largely overlooked along with forms of religious activism that did not necessarily bear fruit in a larger sphere for women."¹

Until recently, this neglect has been particularly apparent in the study of women in Roman Catholic religious orders in Canada. Again, Brouwer's analysis can be applied for she has also noted that in a period when feminist historians have associated organized religion with patriarchal and repressive structures of authority, little encouragement was given to the historian who wanted to investigate the role and personnel of women's religious orders.

An equally important reason for the dearth of these studies has been the inaccessibility of the extensive and valuable resources in the archives which are privately controlled by Catholic dioceses and religious orders. In Canada, the orders themselves have not until very recently, examined their records as sources of information which could reveal their relationship with the secular world. Yet, when access to their archives was granted to a few secular historians, new information and new

¹ Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Transcending the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Putting Religion into English Canadian Women's History," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 27, No.2 (1992 Fall), 48.

casts of characters have emerged which have resulted in fuller and more accurate explanations not only regarding religious history, but also in the fields of Canadian social, political, and educational history.²

It is within this context that I, as a secular historian whose previous research was focused on the origins of Canadian Catholic social thought and action, welcomed the opportunity to write the biography of Sister Catherine Donnelly, S.O.S., a farm girl from Alliston, Ontario and the founder in 1922 of the Sisters of Service, the first English-speaking Canadian Catholic women's religious order. She has recently been cited as one of "the Top Ten people who helped shape the church in Canada," who was inspired to found an order that would "break the mould [which] required religious women to wear distinctive habits and live removed from society under a strict rule."³

The majority of the sources for this paper were located during research for my recent biography of Catherine Donnelly. Her papers and related documents are in the private archives of the Sisters of Service, to which I was given full access. Members of the order were privately interviewed, and several sisters wrote revealing memoirs of their novitiates and of their subsequent personal encounters with Catherine Donnelly. Relevant papers were also secured from the private archives of several other religious orders and dioceses. Altogether, these hitherto private sources provided information on previously unrecognized people and events in twentieth-century Canadian religious and secular history.

Many of Catherine Donnelly's private papers were lost during her long life of ninety-nine years. She appears not to have kept a formal journal; thus the most important information concerning her youth and career must be gleaned from her casual references in letters recovered from her friends, both secular and religious, her family, and from the several short essays on her early life and career which she wrote following her retirement in 1956. Her handwritten charts which listed in detail all of the schools where she taught between 1902 and 1956, and *Ecumenism Blossoms*, her eighty-seven page memoir on her purpose and role in founding the Sisters of Service, have survived. Catherine never lost her remarkable memory nor her professional teacher's concern for accuracy and careful punctuation. Her lively narratives contain no contradic-

² See Nancy McMahon, "Les Religieuses Hospitalières de St. Joseph and the Typhus Epidemic, Kingston, 1847-48," *CCHA Historical Studies*, 58(1991), 41-56; also Elizabeth Smyth, "Developing the Powers of the Youthful Mind': The Evolution of Education for Young Women at St. Joseph's Academy, Toronto, 1854-1911," *CCHA Historical Studies*, 60 (1993-94), 103-25.

³ Joseph Sinasac, "The Register's Top Ten of all time: 10 Canadians who have made a mark on the Catholic Church," *The Catholic Register*, Week of 17 January 2000, 1.

tions or ambiguities, and her factual details of her family, her teaching career, school inspectors, and priests she encountered are confirmed by the public records.

Catherine Donnelly's story begins with the emigration in 1846 from Armagh, Ireland to Canada of her grandfather Hugh, his wife Mary Ann, and infant son Hugh. They settled on a fifty-acre farm in a small Irish Catholic enclave in Adjala Township, Simcoe County, fifty miles north of Toronto and four miles west of Alliston, where the first Irish settlers in the district had arrived in 1820. By the 1880s the local population was almost evenly split between Catholics and Protestants. The Adjala population was unique in that unlike many Ontario settlements, walls of suspicion and hostility had not divided the two Christian groups into antagonistic factions. Although religious affiliation was an important personal identifying factor, Catholics and Protestants mingled socially, cooperated in local civic and farming projects, and were mutually supportive in hard times.⁴ Catherine later declared that this harmony was an important and lasting influence on her spiritual development, and convinced her never to confine her social and professional life only to the Catholic community. Nettie and Amy Wright, daughters of the local Anglican rector, "were at the Alliston School with me and were my best friends. ... They were truly Christians of a very noble type."⁵ She concluded that "this positive approach to society" resulted in "a big share of kindness from such God-fearing lovable Characters provided by my Creator. In my childhood neighbors who were Methodists or Orangemen, had been the best mutual co-workers for good."⁶

Money was scarce in the Donnelly family for father Hugh was the sole support of his aged mother, his wife, and their seven children, as well as his niece and nephew. Catherine was born on 18 February 1884, and only she and her two younger sisters, Teresa (Tess) and Mary (Mamie), survived childhood. The girls learned domestic skills from their mother, but Catherine, the fun-loving tomboy who loved animals, preferred the gardening work outdoors. Her father "very strictly" taught her to ride and to care for and train horses, skills for which he was lo-

⁴ Interview with Mrs. Mary Munnoch of Alliston, local historian, and Supt. of Personnel, Metropolitan Separate School Board, Toronto, 23 November 1992, and with Mrs. Margaret Donnelly, Toronto, 15 February 1993, formerly of Alliston, and a relative of Catherine Donnelly and long time resident of Alliston. In their separate interviews, both women mentioned the unusually harmonious relations between the Roman Catholic and Protestant groups as a local tradition.

⁵ Catherine Donnelly (henceforth CD), undated manuscript, Sisters of Service Archives, (henceforth SOSA), RG1-01, box 8, file 9.

⁶ CD, untitled paper on the founding of the Sisters of Service, December 1966, SOSA, RG1-01, box 9, file 14.

cally highly regarded.⁷ The three sisters were also taught their religion by their “strong-minded, deeply religious and self-less mother.”⁸ “Our country church at North Adjula had a priest who came faithfully for Sunday low Mass and that was it. There was no choir, no contact with religious Orders. They were all in far-away Toronto.”⁹

There was no separate school in the district and Catherine and her sisters attended Meadowvale, a one-room public elementary school one mile from the farm. One teacher taught every subject to the eight grades of children, who were of several religious denominations. Catherine always maintained that this lack of religious segregation throughout her schooling was a great advantage to her. She was a sociable child who made friends easily and learned at an early age to fit in comfortably with groups outside the Catholic milieu.¹⁰ The religious harmony among her own friends and in the community life around Alliston provided the spiritual grounding for her life-long support of ecumenism, which she believed should be based on a mutual respect for others’ beliefs without the pressure of seeking a formal structural union of separate religious groups. Catherine’s personal spirituality was not fueled by an abstract mysticism; it was the beauty of the natural world, and the love and faithfulness she experienced in people and animals that confirmed her belief in the transcendent.¹¹

In the nineteenth century, few farm children were able to obtain secondary education. Catherine was fortunate in that her parents supported her early ambition to be a teacher and arranged for her to board in Alliston to attend high school until she received her grade XI leaving certificate. This qualified her to attend the fourteen-week course at the Bradford Model School which earned her a three-year interim elementary certificate. Her recommendation from the principal stated, “Seldom have I met a student as diligent and attentive as Miss Donnelly. Her work in every respect is eminently satisfactory. In teaching she is diligent, painstaking intelligent and thorough. ... It is with the greatest pleasure and

⁷ CD to nephew Robert G. Gifford (Tess Donnelly Gifford’s son), 11 December 1980. SOSA, no file number.

⁸ CD, manuscript, “The Sisters of Service”, 15 May 1965, SOSA, RG1-01 box 9, file 31.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ CD, untitled paper on the founding of the Sisters of Service, December 1966, SOSA RG1-01, box 5, file 14.

¹¹ Interview with Sister Lena Renaud Sister of Service (hereafter SOS), 7 June 1994. Sister Renaud was the Superior of Camp Morton where Catherine lived for over twenty-four years after her retirement. They had many discussions on the sources of religious inspiration.

confidence I recommend her to the favorable consideration of School Trustees.”¹²

In 1902 at age seventeen she was hired by the nearby Bandon Board to teach in their one room school at an annual salary of \$375. Two years later, encouraged by the good reports of her inspector Rev. Thomas McKee, she enrolled in the one-year Normal School course in Toronto to qualify for her permanent teaching certificate. She was recalled home by her father in May 1905 to a disastrous crisis. Her mother who had been ailing for many months, had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and was not expected to live long. In the emergency, William Scott, the principal of the Normal School, waved her final examinations, and granted the teaching certificate on her excellent year’s work.¹³

Career plans were in abeyance as Catherine nursed her mother and kept the house and the farm going for her father and two sisters. Before her mother’s death in November, Catherine promised her she would see that her sisters were educated so that they could support themselves. The heavily mortgaged farm was sold and the family moved to Alliston in April so that Tess and Mamie could attend high school. With the farm gone, twenty-one year old Catherine became the family’s main support as her father, now aged sixty, did not work permanently again.

For the next twelve years Catherine taught in fifteen public schools in rural central Ontario,¹⁴ often replacing teachers who left mid-year. She moved frequently, always seeking a larger salary as even an extra payment of twenty-five dollars a year was needed for the family. Her own employment charts for Ontario listed two schools in Adjala township, Galt, Apto, Forester’s Falls, Killarney, Heidelberg, Belmore, Chepstow, Manley, Creemore, New Liskeard, Merriton, Caledon, and Penetanguishene. She rarely worked for Separate School Boards as their salaries were considerably less than the Public School Boards, and they

¹² A. Orton, Principal, Bradford Model School, to P. S. Trustees, 29 October 1901, SOSA, RG1-01 box 9, file 7.

¹³ A “Second Class Certificate of Qualification as a Public School Teacher, valid during good behavior” was awarded to Catherine (Katie) Donnelly. “Dated at Toronto this 5th day of July 1905, Registered Number 18704.” SOSA, RG1-01. Box 8, file 14.

¹⁴ In 1973 and 1975 Catherine Donnelly compiled several charts which recorded the names, length of time, and inspectors of the 31 schools where she taught in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta from 1902 to 1956. Scattered throughout her memoirs are the Ontario salaries she received, up to 1919. The annual *Schools and Teachers of the Province of Ontario*, which was first published by the Ministry of Education in 1911, listed the teacher’s name, certification rank, salary, and employing board. Catherine’s memos and charts of her teaching experiences agree with these records.

preferred to hire teaching sisters whom they paid even less than their female lay teachers.

Catherine enjoyed her roving life for she was ambitious and adventurous and enjoyed the challenge of new schools and towns. Some of her family responsibility was lifted in January 1907 when her sister Tess, whom she had enrolled in St. Joseph's Academy in Toronto, ran away to New York City where she entered Mount Sinai Hospital to fulfill her ambition to become a nurse.¹⁵ A few years later Catherine paid for Mamie to attend St. Joseph's Academy where she graduated with her senior high school certificate, and the following year she boarded there while she attended Normal School. Thus Mamie had completed her permanent teaching certification before she began to teach in a Toronto Separate school in 1915.

Catherine reached the apex of her career in Ontario in 1916 when she was appointed teaching principal of the nine-room, 350-student Penetanguishene elementary school. Her salary was \$850 per annum. This town was one of the few places in Ontario where the Education Act declared that the Public School was the Roman Catholic school because the majority of the town ratepayers were of that faith. By 1918 Catherine's salary had been raised to \$925 annually, making her one of the highest paid women teachers in Ontario, well above the average wage of \$580 earned by female teachers in rural areas, where male teachers earned \$686 per annum. She found it a professional challenge to be in charge of a large school and she liked the picturesque town with its magnificent St. Ann's Catholic church, which she attended faithfully every Sunday. Her strict no nonsense form of discipline was lightened with a merry sense of humour, and a sincere love of children. Her inspector had declared her to be "one of the best teachers in North Simcoe."¹⁶

It all ended abruptly on May 20th 1918 when Archbishop McNeil requested the Community of St. Joseph in Toronto to send four sisters to take charge of the Penetanguishene Public (Catholic) School in the coming September. The Community's Council agreed provided the following conditions were met:

1. Each Sister to receive \$500.00 per annum.

¹⁵ Catherine Donnelly's memoirs do not mention this incident, but the St. Joseph's Academy School *Register and Accounts Book*, 1905-1907, p. 3, recorded that Teresa Donnelly "took French leave, Saturday Jan 19, 1907," and that a refund was paid to "Catherine Donnelly of \$61.25 of the 65.50 paid for board and tuition for the term ending June 1907."

¹⁶ Letter of recommendation signed by Joseph L. Garvin, Inspector of Public Schools, North Simcoe, 16 June 1916. RG1-01 box 9, file 7.

2. The Community to be provided with a furnished home free of charge.

3. That the house be put in a state of good repair, the heating made satisfactory, and two additional rooms built at the rear to do service as Kitchen and laundry. The house is to be only an arrangement for a year or so until a suitable residence can be built,¹⁷

Thus, although the Sisters of St. Joseph would work for lower wages, the Order insisted on living quarters which enabled them to live a semi-cloistered life of strictly controlled privacy as stipulated in their Constitutions.¹⁸

Catherine was disappointed at being displaced and handed in her resignation, accepting the Board's action as one of the ever-present disadvantages for laywomen who worked for Catholic School Boards. She considered her next move. Although her father was still dependent on her support, her sisters were now settled in their own careers. In 1917 Mamie had entered the Community of St. Joseph and was now Sister Justina CSJ. In temperament she had always been markedly different from Catherine; a gentle, reflective, passive, and earnestly religious little girl, who during her adolescence had yearned to join a religious order. Adventurous Tess had joined the nursing staff at Sinai Hospital after graduation, and having recently joined the American Medical Corps, was now nursing the wounded in France.

The school inspector, Mr. Garvin, told Catherine that she was not likely to get as good a school anywhere in Ontario as Penetanguishene.¹⁹ Teachers were needed in the rural areas of Western Canada where in the decade before the war, thousands of Central Europeans had arrived to take up land in the three prairie provinces. The dearth of teachers was particularly acute in the isolated rural districts away from the conveniences of the cities. The western public school boards would welcome an experienced teacher; and they often paid higher salaries. Catherine's friend Mary O'Connor, who had also been displaced by the arrival of the St. Joseph teachers, decided to join her in seeking work in the west.

There were offered several positions and by August they had selected two one-room rural schools five miles apart near the town of Stettler, Alberta, in the beautiful ranch country east of Red Deer. Catherine was delighted to board at the Claeys ranch where the owner

¹⁷ Archives of the Community of St. Joseph, Community Annals, Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto. 9 June 1918, 544.

¹⁸ Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, Chapter X, Enclosure. p. 40.

¹⁹ CD, Memoir, "The Birth of the SOS," 1 August 1955. SOSA, RG1-01, box 1, file 5.

kindly loaned her a horse for her transportation to school and the nearest hamlet, Erskine, seven miles away. Mary also found a room at a ranch house near her school. They were taken on tours of the area and soon observed that most of the well-established farmers and ranchers nearby were Protestant immigrants from Britain, but there were enclaves further away from these settlements where recent immigrants from the Ukraine, Poland, and Germany were struggling to establish homesteads. The majority of these had been nominally Catholic but there was no Catholic church or Separate School in the district. An itinerant priest on his infrequent visits to the area would say Mass at the private chapel in the house of a local French Canadian rancher. Catherine and Mary were invited, and did attend, but they noticed that no aid, spiritual, medical, or social was available from the diocese for the poor immigrants. They were told that this was typical of many of the rural districts, and it disturbed them that “few of the Catholics got to mass regularly and many had become quite indifferentIt was easy for us to notice the dearth of religious knowledge among the children and youth in general.”²⁰

Both women had settled well into their schools and were making friends with their hospitable employers when, at the end of November 1918, all schools were abruptly ordered closed by the Alberta government. Soldiers returning from the trenches in France after the Armistice had brought the Spanish Influenza into Alberta. So lethal that it could kill within three days, it had spread like a prairie wildfire from the cities to the countryside. “The young couple who had the private church on their ranch both died after a few days illness, also a stock buyer whom we knew well and whose wife was a nurse.”²¹ The government requested the teachers in the farming districts to volunteer to aid the stricken farm families who lived far from medical aid and neighbors. Catherine and Mary, who had both taken a St. John’s Ambulance course, spent the next two months nursing the sick at their farms. It was a frightening, exhausting, soul-shaking experience. “In the homes of the Flu victims the utter lack of religion, the regard for material things only shocked us. All that fall we faced the possibility of death for our patients and for ourselves too. ... I came to wonder if mere teaching gave me a full enough life. I looked back on what seemed to me years lacking in seriousness.”²² Their observations of the crushing poverty of the poor settlers and of others who were indifferent to their religion under any circumstances made them conclude that “the spiritual condition in the homes was like a barren place, a Godless foreign country.”²³

²⁰ CD, Memoir, “Why I am a Sister of Service”, 1949-50. SOSA, RG1-01 box9, file 54. p.2.

²¹ Ibid. p. 3.

²² CD, Notebook, SOSA, RG1-01, Box 1, file 5.

²³ CD, Manuscript, undated. SOSA, RG1-01, box 9, file 27.

Catherine did not blame the people for their obsession with their material prosperity. She blamed her church for having concentrated its resources on the urban population with the result that “although the cities had many priests and many different kinds of religious communities, there were none for the country places.”²⁴ She could not help but contrast her church’s policy with that of the major Protestant denominations which in the same period of high immigration had spent millions on missionary and social work in rural Western Canada.

Catherine’s second major concern was the scarcity of educational facilities for rural children of any religious persuasion. The Catholic immigrants were too poor to fund Separate schools and unlike Ontario, the western provinces did not give grants for Separate elementary education. The few teachers who did venture into the public schools in the isolated areas did not stay long; they were defeated by the poverty, the loneliness, and the harsh living conditions in the immigrant settlements. Catherine recognized that these were future Canadian citizens who were in danger of becoming an illiterate generation, who would have no knowledge of Canadian history and political traditions, or the Christian sources of their society’s moral values. She was very patriotic and believed that both of these were the essential foundation stones on which to build an enduring Canada. As she pondered this situation her disquiet increased. Was it her duty as a Catholic to try to remedy the situation? How effective could one person be when many workers were needed? Should she join a religious order and persuade its members to undertake teaching in the isolated rural schools of western Public School systems? Teaching Sisters do not leave their schools because of discouragement or marriage and this would bring stability to a community’s school. Did she even have a vocation? If she did, who would look after her father, whose health was failing and who still required moral and financial support? She decided to seek the advice of a priest.

She left Erskine for Calgary in January 1919 and was hired by the Calgary Separate School Board as principal of the Sacred Heart School. She soon became acquainted with Fr. William Cameron, a brilliant and popular fellow principal to whom she confided her dilemma. Her sincerity and zeal to help relieve the spiritual and physical poverty she had seen convinced him that she had a vocation, and he advised her to join an established teaching order, such as the Community of St. Joseph at Peterborough, Ontario. He had heard that they might come to Calgary to teach and perhaps they might be persuaded to support her plans for a new type of rural ministry.

²⁴ CD, Memoir, “The Birth of the SOS,” 1 August 1955. SOSA, RG1-01, box 1, file 5.

After her father's death in December 1919, Catherine, free of family obligations for the first time in fourteen years, sought an interview with the Mother General of the Peterborough Community. It was a disaster. After listening to her plans the Mother General stated that "she did not think I should be accepted into their Community."²⁵

Catherine had never considered entering any religious order because she had had little direct contact with them. She was not cognizant of their theology of obedience; she only knew that the sisters' dress, deportment, and lifestyle were strictly controlled. She had always planned her own career, and as she was a sociable person with many friends, male and female, she enjoyed the freedom to attend social affairs in the communities where she worked. She did not understand why her vision of being part of the solution to the immigrant's problems was rejected. Considerably deflated "tired and discouraged I was in tears the whole way back to Toronto."²⁶

She decided to consult Fr. Arthur Coughlan CSsR, the Provincial of the Redemptorists, whom she had once consulted on a personal family problem. His order was working with Ukrainians in Yorkton Saskatchewan, and he was well acquainted with the problems of the Catholic Church in Western Canada.²⁷ He too was impressed with Catherine's energy and passionate concern for the poor immigrants. He also agreed with Fr. Cameron that working alone in the west was not the way to alleviate this serious omission in the Church's ministry. She should apply to the Community of St. Joseph in Toronto as they were the most likely of the women's orders to consider opening a western rural mission.

When Catherine was received as a Postulant of the Order in July 1920, she was utterly unprepared for the type of training she would experience in this probationary period. After seventeen years as an independent career woman, she undertook to be obedient to a Holy Rule which would govern forever every aspect of her life. Obedience meant that "Sisters are obliged under pain of sin to obey when the Superiors command in virtue of the vow of Holy Obedience."²⁸ Obedience was defined as the complete surrender of her will to God as expressed

²⁵ CD, Manuscript, undated. SOSA, RG1-01, box 9, file 27.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For background on the two perceptive priests who were Catherine's advisers see Jeanne R. Beck, *To Do and To Endure: The Life of Catherine Donnelly, Sister of Service* (Toronto, 1997), 50-2, and 55-6.

²⁸ *Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Joseph*, Chapter VII, "Vow and Virtue of Obedience," 64, p. 31.

through the orders of her Novice Mistress and Mother Superior.²⁹ Permission had to be humbly requested for the slightest deviation from their rigid daily schedule, and designated periods of silence were to be meticulously observed. "Particular friendships" between Sisters were "faults opposed to charity" and against the Rule.³⁰

Catherine was not allowed to see Sister Justina, as Postulants were isolated from the professed sisters as well as from the world. Removed from their former practices of work, prayer, and social relations, they were in the process of being re-oriented into religious life so that in six months they would be worthy to be clothed with the Holy Habit, and received as Novices into the Community of St. Joseph.

Catherine complied with these regulations, but she also spoke openly about her own plans to be a teaching sister in the rural Public Schools in Western Canada. She noted that the Community's present religious habit, as described in the *Constitutions* must have a black floor length skirt two yards wide, a broad white linen guimpe, a white cornet joined under the chin, and white band across the forehead, on top of which were two layers of black veil extending six inches below the elbow, over the twelve-inch wide black sleeves which extended to the end of her hand, was an impractical garment for the spartan conditions teachers presently encountered in the dusty and muddy prairie settlements. She felt too that its severity would cause a breach between her and the people she hoped to serve. To express these opinions were serious offenses against the Holy Rule. Sisters under obedience were forbidden to express their preferences on the location or the type of work which would be assigned to them by the Mother Superior, and the *Constitutions* stated that "it is strictly forbidden to make any changes in the religious habit without the permission of the Holy See."³¹ Despite a severe reprimand, Catherine did not cease her campaign for a western rural assignment. Six weeks before the end of her postulancy she was told she was not being accepted into the Order, and to leave immediately.

It was a bitter, humiliating blow. In her determination to serve the poor, it had not occurred to her that she might be found unsuitable to be a St. Joseph Sister. On 20 December 1920, she tearfully told Fr. Coughlan that she had been rejected. To her surprise he laughed, and commented, "I guess you talked too much about the West. You ought to start

²⁹ Ibid. "The Sisters shall have great esteem for Holy Obedience; they should faithfully and joyously fulfil the orders of their Superior, seeing God alone in her person and His Will in her commands." 69. p. 33.

³⁰ Ibid. Chapter XIII, "Intercourse of the Sisters With One Another." (f), p. 53.

³¹ Ibid. Chapter IV, "Religious Habit," 33, p. 15.

a community of your own.”³² In her many Memoirs which mention this conversation, Catherine declared it as the moment of birth for the Sisters of Service. Fr. Coughlan had perceived that her solution for reaching the immigrant population of Canada was so revolutionary that none of the women’s religious orders then working in Canada would be able to consider them.

Fr. Coughlan arranged for a series of discussions among the Archbishop of Toronto, Neil McNeil, Catherine Donnelly, and himself, as according to Canon Law new religious orders must first obtain the approval of the local bishop.³³ Catherine presented the ideas which she had now worked out as a feasible plan for a new order. First, drawing on her experience of making her own living by teaching in rural Public schools in Ontario and the West, she declared that, “we could ... use the conditions just as they existed and develop a teaching Order for the rural West of Canada. Like St. Paul, we could earn our own living and have rural public schools for anchor holds. There were many with teacherages attached. Thus our living quarters would be supplied. Father Coughlan and the Archbishop took to this idea enthusiastically.”³⁴ The Archbishop suggested that some health work be included as, “People approve of health work even if done by nuns ... Other rural endeavour could be anything to help families, provide clothing, medicine, encouragement, guidance and thus come under the head of social work.”³⁵

At Catherine’s suggestion the Order was called The Sisters of Service, for as teachers, nurses, and social workers, they were to be an active missionary order committed to alleviate the poverty of body and spirit of the most abandoned souls, with a special mission to immigrants. All agreed that they would not undertake any large urban apostolates, such as orphanages, hospitals, or private schools in which the established women’s orders were already involved. Sisters of Service would live singly if necessary, or in small groups in hamlets and at cross-roads in the sparsely settled areas.

³² CD, “The Birth of the SOS,” 1 August 1955. SOSA, RG1-01, box1, file 5. In another SOSA Memoir, written by Catherine Donnelly on 18 January 1959, she narrates the same incident, but quotes Father Coughlan as saying, “We’ll have to start a new community of our own.”

³³ *Canonical Legislation Concerning Religious*, 1917. Authorized English Translation. Citta del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1949. Canon 492 #1. “Bishops...can establish religious Congregations; but they must not establish them or permit them to be established without consulting the Apostolic See.”

³⁴ CD, Memoir, “The Sisters of Service.” 15 May 1965. SOSA, RG1-01, box 9, file 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

At subsequent meetings the three made several other important decisions which would identify the new religious order as one which had broken free from the monastic restrictions which had previously been applied in varying degrees, to all women's orders. The net effect of these traditional rules had been to curtail the religious orders' involvement with and accessibility to the secular world. In contrast, the Sisters of Service would offer their lives to God by taking the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but be committed to living and working among the laity, unrestricted by rules of even semi-enclosure. This freedom would increase the Order's opportunities for mission among non-Catholics as well as bolster the faith of those who had lapsed because their needs had been neglected.

Catherine declared that as a first step, the sister's long voluminous habit must be abandoned as being too impractical, and too conspicuous a sign of the barrier between them and the laity. Both clerics agreed and Archbishop McNeil even suggested that Sisters of Service wear no distinguishing dress. Then they concluded that a recognizable uniform was a practical necessity because the Vatican would demand it, and it would be more economical to provide all the sisters with a simple dress, coat cloak, and small hat in a current style. Their clothing could be altered by the Order if fashion changed and the wearer became oddly conspicuous. The substitution of a hat for the traditional elaborate headdress would be more economical, remove a visible symbol of the sisters' separation from society, and also make it unnecessary to cut off their hair. The religious insignia of the Order would be a small, simple silver cross on a slender chain inscribed "We Have Come To Serve," which could be removed or tucked inside their dress, if circumstances such as teaching in public schools required that no official religious insignia be worn in the classrooms.

The Sisters of Service would continue to use their own Christian and family names instead of receiving a new religious name when they took their vows. "They were careful to avoid anything which might be a barrier. Requesting strangers to address them by a Saint's name might prove to be such...to those not of the Catholic faith."³⁶

In their discussions on community lifestyle, Catherine insisted that there would be no extreme form of penance or fasting, or very early rising hours (i.e. before 6 a.m.) which would endanger health and contribute to fatigue on the job. When the local people at the mission needed

³⁶ Sister Catherine Schmeltzer SOS, in an interview with Jeanne Beck, 8 May 1996.

help, the sisters could go to their houses alone and even remain overnight in their homes if they felt it was necessary.³⁷

Fr. Coughlan summed up the objectives and methods of the new order in a letter to the priest who was to be appointed by him with the approval of Archbishop McNeil, to be the clerical director of the Sisters of Service. “They were to do educational, medical and social work among the poor in Western Canada, particularly the foreign-born. ... Modern conditions will require a modification of the usual rules and customs of ordinary religious orders. For example, we think the nuns should not have a special religious habit but dress ordinarily. They would have to go by twos into lonely settlements and be deprived of Mass and Holy Communion for a long period etc. What we need now is money and candidates.”³⁸

Money was now of primary importance as canon law decreed that “no religious house may be erected unless it can be prudently estimated that it will be able to provide suitably for the habitation and maintenance of its members from its own resources, or from habitual alms, or otherwise.”³⁹ Catherine herself contributed her savings of \$2,000; Archbishop McNeil contributed some personal funds, but said that the debt-ridden Archdiocese of Toronto had no money to spare, and a large sum was required to launch a new order. He persuaded the Catholic Women’s League to contribute \$6,000 annually until the order was established, and was also successful in a personal appeal to Theresa Korman Small, a wealthy Toronto widow.⁴⁰ Fr. Coughlan was delegated by McNeil to be his clerical overseer of the Sisters of Service. Such supervision would be necessary until enough women had entered the order to ensure its continuance. The bishop would then instruct the sisters to elect their own Sister General (the title selected for the head of the Sisters of Service), and a Council to advise her. This could take many years, and Coughlan

³⁷ This freedom of movement and judgment differed remarkably from the prohibition common to all traditional women’s religious orders that, “On no occasion shall a Sister be permitted to go out without a companion whom the Local Superior does not nominate or approve.” *Rules of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Poor*. 1913 Edition, #117.

³⁸ Fr. Arthur Coughlan CSsR. to Fr. George Daly CSsR, 29 September 1921. SOSA, RG1-01, box 1, file 6.

³⁹ *Canonical Legislation Concerning Religious*, (1917) Authorized English Translation, 1949.

⁴⁰ Fr. Coughlan CSsR to Catherine Donnelly, 21 September, 1921. SOSA, RG1-01, box 1, file 6. Mrs. Small was a devout Catholic and a benefactor of many Catholic charities and religious orders in Toronto. She was also the wealthy widow of Ambrose Small, a Toronto theatre impresario who had disappeared suddenly on 2 December 1919. Long and extensive police investigations failed find any trace of him or any reason for his disappearance.

soon realized that his responsibilities as Provincial of his own order would leave him no time for such a big task. McNeil and Catherine agreed with Coughlan's proposal that the administrative responsibility for the new order be delegated to Fr. George Daly CSsR, whom he described as an experienced, energetic, and able priest.

During the early years of a new Order all its Postulants and Novices must be trained by a senior sister of a well established religious order. McNeil asked Catherine to chose which order he should ask to provide a Novice Mistress to train her and the three other women who had applied to join the Sisters of Service. Catherine asked for the Community of St. Joseph at Toronto. In spite of her previous bad experience, she had admired Sister Avila, her former Novice Mistress, and she knew that Sister Justina would be pleased. The training would have to be according to the Constitution of that Community for that was the Rule their Novice Mistress was vowed to keep, and the Sisters of Service Constitutions would not be ready for presentation to Rome for several years. It was decided this training would take place in the Sisters of Service own Motherhouse, as yet non-existent. Finding a suitable building for the order's headquarters would be one of Fr. Daly's first tasks.

In January 1922 fifty-year old Fr. Daly was instructed to leave his post at the CSsR. mission in St. John, New Brunswick, to become the priest administrator and director of the Sisters of Service in Toronto. Born in Quebec of French-Canadian Irish parentage, he was bilingual, and from age fifteen until his ordination at age twenty-five he had studied at the Redemptorist seminary in Belgium. He had worked in parishes in Quebec City and Montreal, and for three years was the rector of the Cathedral in Regina where he had become acquainted with the shortcomings of the Catholic Church in the Canadian West. An extroverted, energetic man with many influential friends both lay and clerical, he was eager to undertake this unusual assignment. He too had tried to introduce changes in his own religious order to make it more effective in the Canadian milieu and had been rebuffed. Catherine was introduced to him shortly after he arrived in Toronto and had been impressed with his sincerity and enthusiasm. She felt that he was "a very intelligent, zealous and capable priest."⁴¹

First, Daly asked the Western Canadian bishops if they would welcome this new order into their dioceses. Most responded cordially and two requested that they be sent the first sisters as soon as they had completed their novitiate. Immediately he launched a big fund-raising campaign and also advertised in Catholic papers for qualified teachers and nurses to join the Sisters of Service. With the funds supplied by Mrs.

⁴¹ CD, unpublished manuscript, *Ecumenism Blossoms*, undated, (probably 1968). # 49.

Small, he bought a large old mansion suitable for a Motherhouse in Rosedale central Toronto. The Catholic Women's League undertook to furnish it in time for the dedication.

Mother General Victoria CSJ selected Sister Lidwina CSJ to be the Novice Mistress of the new order. For six years she had been the Mother Superior of the order's convent as well as the music teacher of the separate school in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. It was her first appointment to the position of Novice Mistress and she would become known for her own conscientious adherence to the St. Joseph's Holy Rule which she earnestly tried to impress on the sisters in her charge.

In a simple ceremony conducted by Archbishop McNeil during the first Mass in the newly created chapel of the Motherhouse on the 15th of August 1922, Catherine and three others were accepted as Postulants in the Sisters of Service. Although this date was announced as the official founding date of the order, Sister Lidwina did not appear to have been told of Catherine's great contribution to its unique character and purpose. Fr. Daly set up his office in the Motherhouse and increased his speaking engagements in order to appeal for more funds.⁴² He also found time to buy a 100-yard bolt of plain grey wool serge for the SOS uniforms; and interview all applicants to the order. Many of these he regretfully turned down because they were not in good health and he sensed they would be unable to stand the rigors of life in the frontier settlements. In addition to this administrative work, he also played a large role in the sisters' spiritual formation through his instructive talks and sermons.

Catherine was upset to learn in April 1923 that with Archbishop McNeil's agreement, Fr. Daly had purchased the house next door to the Motherhouse to be used as a women's hostel. Rooms at a reasonable rent would be offered to immigrant working girls and the home would be staffed by Sisters of Service. Catherine confided to Fr. Coughlan, who had been appointed the Order's Spiritual Director, that this was opposite to the order's declared purpose to work with the rural poor. He later reported to Catherine that Daly's response to her objection was that "he will not be guided by the opinions of a woman."⁴³ The hostel on Wellesley Place was the first of many similar city houses for hostels which Daly would eventually purchase between Halifax and Vancouver.

⁴² In September 1922 Daly appealed to the Catholic Womens' League for individual contributions, "Remember the small amounts make big sums ... The figures that appear in today's paper of \$1,500,000 collected by the Women's Methodist Missionary Soc. tell us eloquently – may I add reproachfully – what continued effort can produce." Daly, notes of his address to the CWL Second Annual Convention, 26-30 September 1922. SOSA, RG5-2, box 1, file 7.

⁴³ CD, *Ecumenism Blossoms*, #105.

Catherine experienced one serious crisis at the end of her first Novitiate year, when she was eligible to be sent out on a mission. She was informed by Sister Lidwina that she was being posted to an Indian School in the Diocese of Winnipeg. Catherine, realizing the directive had come from Fr. Daly, said firmly, "No, I will not go that is not our work," and explained that the Sisters of Service were founded to work with the immigrants who had been neglected by the Church in the outlying settlements. Other Catholic women's orders were already working with the Indian people and she had understood that the Order was not to duplicate their efforts.⁴⁴ Sr. Lidwina was displeased, and a coldness developed in their relations which lasted many years. The records do not indicate that Catherine was reprimanded by the clergy for her bold stance, but she ceased to be consulted by the clergy on the Order's future development.

Catherine's protest did have some influence, as the following year Sr. Lidwina informed her that the same Archbishop was now requesting three sisters to teach and nurse in an immigrant community on Lake Winnipeg. As soon as she and Sister Catherine Wymbs, a nurse, had taken their vows, which was in a few weeks, they would leave for Camp Morton, Manitoba. Catherine was thrilled that at age forty, she had achieved her goal. She would be part of the Church's new thrust into the poor immigrant settlements in the hinterlands of Canada.

At the Mass celebrated by Archbishop McNeil on the 2nd of August 1924, Catherine took her vows and became known officially as the First Sister of Service. At the reception afterward McNeil asked that the Order's official *Annals* record that day's events. "The first thing I want recorded is ... that the founders of the Sisters of Service are Rev. Fathers Arthur Coughlan and George Daly. I have cooperated, the St. Joseph Sisters have cooperated, but the founders are really Fathers Coughlan and Daly. I want this entered in the *Annals*."⁴⁵ Sister Catherine Donnelly's vision for founding their order was not mentioned, and she would remain silent about her contribution for many years.

Camp Morton was a former children's camp on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, and Archbishop Sinnott of Winnipeg said the three sisters would live in a two-room cabin until a larger house 26 x 34 ft. could be built. It was the first of many missions in the west where the Sisters of Service would arrive to find they had to live in poor, partially completed, ill-equipped buildings as bleak and crowded as those of the people they served. In spite of these physical

⁴⁴ CD, manuscript , RG1-01, box 9, file 30.

⁴⁵ Letter to Sister Quinn SOS from Fr. A.M.McBriarty CSsR, 14.August 1951, quoting from the *Annals* of the CssR, Toronto, 2 August 1924. SOSA, RG1-02, box 1, file 6.



Catherine Donnelly SOS. August 1924
Leaving for Camp Morton, MB, for the First SOS Mission
(Courtesy Sisters of Service Archives)

hardships, the Camp Morton mission was a great success. The clinic run by Sister Wymbs and her successors was urgently required in the farming community where accidents happened frequently and the hospital was many miles away. The two one-room public schools located six miles from Camp Morton provided education for the children of the Polish, German, and Ukrainian settlers in the district. The sisters revitalized the community through their enthusiasm, expert teaching in the schools, special festivals at the church, and the open-door policy they maintained at their little house. A succession of sisters continued to work at the mission for over sixty years.⁴⁶



Setting out for School from Camp Morton, 1924-1926
(Courtesy of Sisters of Service Archives)

Catherine's original plan for a religious order which would be supported by the salaries of teachers and other professionals did not work

⁴⁶ In 1980 CBC broadcaster Roy Bonisteel focused his TV programme "Man Alive," on the lives of the Sisters of Service, and filmed them at work at Camp Morton. Using the title "You've Come a Long Way Sister," he interviewed Catherine Donnelly then aged ninety-six, and discussed the remarkable changes which she as founder, had been the first to introduce into a Canadian women's religious order.

out, partly because during the Depression, teaching jobs were not plentiful as bankrupt communities could not pay their teachers salaries. But the main reason was that the few of the women who joined the order had professional training. Many had been unable to complete secondary school because of family financial problems. Some of the parish clergy were uncertain and even disapproving of the Orders' new unorthodox ways and advised educated young women who had religious vocations to join the traditional teaching and nursing orders. Thus during the Depression, the revenue from the SOS women's hostels often exceeded that received from the salaries of the professional sisters.



The Teacherage at Diomand Coolee School, Bergfield, SK. 1938
(Courtesy Sisters of Service Archives)

Daly very skillfully used the home-making and people skills of the lesser educated women whom he assigned to the city hostels. Hostels were located in Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Halifax, and the sisters in charge developed support programmes for many of the young immigrant women who were working in the cities. Catherine's main objection to the hostels was that paying off their mortgages drained the Order of funds which she felt would have been better spent on the chronically under-funded rural ministry, and on further education for the hostel sisters. She believed that the Order's survival could best be assured by having sisters engaged with society as trained workers in the helping professions. With this expertise the sisters could also work in the parishes as partners with the clergy in a common cause rather than as subordinates. She never campaigned for women's ordination, but she felt strongly that their opinions should be respected and their professional expertise used by the clergy with whom they worked.

Catherine was sent from Camp Morton to Vilna, Alberta in 1926 to teach and open another mission in another needy community. From then

on she and the other teaching and nursing sisters in the order undertook assignments in the most desolate areas in the west. In spite of their efforts, a few missions were unsuccessful and had to be closed. But the majority succeeded in raising the people's quality of living at both a spiritual and physical level. Some of the hostel sisters also became workers in the Order's religious correspondence schools in Edmonton and Regina. The sisters who spoke foreign languages worked out of their hostels at Canadian ports meeting every boat carrying immigrants from central Europe.

By 1954, a visibly ailing Fr. Daly reported that the Order was now debt free. With a membership of only 119 women, of whom 93 had taken permanent vows, they were now serving in 22 missions across Canada. He regretted that the Order had not grown faster, but assured them that their quality more than made up for their lack of quantity.⁴⁷

Catherine retired from public school teaching in 1956 at the age of seventy-two and was moved to Camp Morton, still the centre of a large farming community. Here she was happy to continue a project she had begun in 1937, when she had pressed the Sister General to select sisters who were good candidates for teaching or nursing and assign them to studying with her for their secondary school diplomas so that they could be admitted to normal school or schools of nursing and social work. She was highly successful with her first three students, two of whom became teachers, and the third a nurse who was assigned to the Order's small hospital in Edson, Alberta. When it was opportune, she had continued this work at other missions. In retirement she started this work again and reveled in the opportunity to become acquainted with the young novices, all the while tutoring them in the secondary entrance requirements for higher education.

At the 1966 General Chapter the Report on Personnel showed a substantial increase in the number of sisters who had secured professional qualifications since Daly's report twelve years before. There were now 128 members in the Order and of these 17 were registered nurses, 7 were registered technicians, 32 were certified teachers, 12 were housekeepers, 23 worked in the hostels (now called Residential Clubs), 19 worked in the catechetical schools, and 6 were social workers and home visitors, and the rest had administrative tasks.

In 1968 the Sister General announced that as a result of the implementation of the Order's educational policy during the last two years, three sisters had graduated with B.Ed., one with a B.A., three had be-

⁴⁷ Fr. George Daly CSSR, Report on Personnel, Discipline, and Works of the Institute, submitted at the General Chapter, July 1954, SOSA, RG3-04, box 1, file 2.

come welfare workers, four had taken special courses for teachers of religion, one qualified in public health, one had become a medical record technician, and twelve sisters were studying for careers in teaching, social welfare, public health, libraries, and practical nursing. The Chapter closed with a motion recommending that Sister Catherine Donnelly's name be added to those of Archbishop McNeil, Fr. Arthur Coughlan, and Fr. George Daly who were already recognized as co-founders of the Sisters of Service.

Administration and personnel management were not Catherine's strong points. She had not been appointed by the clergy to be the first Sister General in 1928, nor was she elected to that office when the Sisters of Service themselves were permitted by Daly to elect their own officers. Yet her influence on the Order was pervasive, for she had continued to prove by her personal faith and endurance in the most difficult situations that the principles on which she had insisted the Order be founded were appropriate for the Canadian milieu. She believed that the Sisters of Service should become an integral part of the whole community, a source of education, friendship, and social services for all, regardless of the religious persuasion of the people.

Although Catherine and Daly disagreed on the principle of the appropriateness of the Order's involvement in hostels, they were one in their conviction that the future of the Church's missionary work lay in the abandonment of outmoded restrictions on the methods by which apostolic religious orders carried out their missions. The religious principles and the practical methods which Catherine, McNeil, and Coughlan had agreed were the way to combine the spiritual objectives of the cloister with the apostolate of active evangelism and social service were expressed in the official *Holy Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Service* which Daly wrote at McNeil's request. He translated it into French and presented it to Archbishop McNeil for his signature just a few days before McNeil died in May 1934. By signing the document McNeil authorized its presentation to the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome for Approbation, which was the final Vatican declaration recognizing a new order's official status within the Church.⁴⁸

The final vindication of Catherine's vision for a new approach to the Church's mission were the extensive reforms which the Sacred Congregation for Religious ordered all the religious orders to undertake follow-

⁴⁸ Canon Law decreed that the Rule of an order whose founding had been previously approved could only be presented for approbation "when the congregation should have sufficiently expanded, brought forth good results, given a good trial to its constitutions and are possessed of sufficient means." D.I. Lanslots, OSB, *Handbook of Canon Law for Congregations of Women Under Simple Vows*, 4th ed. (New York, 1910), art. 23, pp. 23-4.

ing their deliberations at Vatican II on the need for reform in the Church. As a result, strict rules of cloister and semi-cloister and extreme forms of fasting and penance were abolished by the apostolic orders; religious habits were modified and in many cases were given up completely for secular dress. Definitions of the three vows, particularly that of obedience, were changed to allow discussion and compromise. Breaking free of many of the monastic traditions allowed for greater individual development and resulted in the introduction of new and imaginative ways for the religious orders to serve the “abandoned ones” which society was neglecting. The Sisters of Service, too, have continued to find new social needs to fulfill and new methods by which they carry on the vision of their founder.