



Boston Catholic Journal

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Take the Highroad

The Life of

Sister Mary Francis of the Five Wounds

Margaret Sinclair



Margaret Sinclair
Sister Mary Francis of the Five Wounds
(1900 -1925)

By a Poor Clare Colettine Nun
Ty Mam Duw Monastery, Hawarden, Wales
2007

At the highest point on Castle Rock overlooking the city of Edinburgh is the tiny chapel where St. Margaret, the 11th century Queen of Scotland, prayed; and down below tucked out of sight were the blackened tenements of Middle Arthur Place and Blackfriars Street, where Margaret Sinclair was born and reared. Margaret was daughter of an Edinburgh dustman, and she did her praying in the humble surrounds of St Patrick's, poorly dressed and with a baby sister in the crook of her arm.

Edinburgh is a city of contrasts. It was the home of Knox and the Presbyterian Kirk. Less than fifty years before Margaret was born a Presbyterian minister, McLeod Campbell, was deposed by a general assembly of the Church of Scotland there for preaching such outrageously Catholic doctrines as "the universality of God's love for mankind and Christ's atonement for sin." In 1900 when Margaret was born, religious tolerance was not Edinburgh's most conspicuous feature.

Andrew Sinclair, Margaret's father, was a convert to Catholicism. He had taught himself to read and write for he had never been to school. His wife Elizabeth was scarcely better off, yet between them they provided a genuinely loving home in the three-roomed flat where they brought up their six children. Margaret was particularly close to her sister Bella, and they were rarely seen apart. In her brief school career she showed intelligence and was good at games. She stayed off school to nurse her mother in a protracted illness, and had a spare time job scrubbing floors and running errands for a tailoress.

1914

At the beginning of a century wracked by the horrors of the great war "to end all wars", Margaret left school at fourteen. She was put as an apprentice to a French-polisher, as her father, and later her elder brother, John, were called up to fight in the trenches. Her childhood, such as it was, had ended.

Margaret and Bella struggled to support their mother with their minimal wages and worked an allotment. It was a cruel struggle to pay the rent and to feed themselves. Margaret, when her mother broke down and wept, had one unvarying answer, "*Dinna give in*" The lonely hours of anxiety drove her to pray deeply, and to see prayer as an answer to life's suffering. At the battle of Loos, three Scottish divisions were cut to pieces and the survival of loved ones seemed like a miracle. The agony in the trenches was bringing a new world to birth and its birth pangs were terrible.

It was no easier on the factory floor where, though her typically Scottish reticence prevented her from talking about the faith, her demeanour made it obvious, and she was the target of sly jokes and unpleasantness. Once again it was a case of "*Dinna give in!*" She joined the trade union in which she became an active member, but her one disagreement with the manager was quite wordless. Having found amongst the junk of the cabinet works a discarded picture of Our Lady, she hung it up over her workplace. The manager took it down - so each morning she restored it to its place.

She wrote for her mother, Elizabeth, to her father in France, where one gloriously unpunctuated postcard must have caused much amusement. It ran, "May God save you from your loving wife." When Andrew Sinclair came home he waved it at her exclaiming, "Will ye read that, ma damsel!"

The war ended, followed by a massive economic slump. Scottish economy had been heavily war-oriented: coal, steel and battleships on the Clyde were no longer needed, and the capital and skills involved were not easily transferred. The Depression followed, and Margaret found herself among the unemployed. Eventually she got a job at McVitie Biscuits.

A holiday at Rosewall was, for her and Bella, their first encounter with country life. They celebrated their freedom by going to Mass and receiving Communion daily. Bella had some misgivings as to whether they were holy enough for this, but Margaret replied "We're not going because we are good, but because we want to be good." It was on another annual holiday, at Bo'ness, that she met Patrick Lynch.

Time changes all things

A number of photographs have survived of Margaret; among them some taken with Bella and her parents, one posed by a painted gate in a photographer's studio and one dressed in the borrowed finery of a beaded bodice and a fur boa (the latter has sometimes suffered from photo-editing when reproduced on prayer cards). She was a beautiful girl. She had that unique quality that made people look twice, and the sort of smile that people remembered years afterwards. Despite the hardships of her life she was vivacious, loved pretty clothes, and enjoyed dancing. That there was another side to her life, painted in very different colours, only, those closest to her understood.

Pat Lynch, like so many, had mislaid his faith in the trenches. Meeting Margaret gave his life a purpose; because Margaret believed implicitly in the love and mercy of God, he too, found it easy to believe; in her faith he found his own. In Pat's estrangement from the Church Margaret saw God's call to service. She persuaded him back to the Sacraments and he discovered a genuine and growing love of God. As he said later, she made a new man of him. Though touched, and even flattered, Margaret was not in love with him. What had been a sort of game became a certain agony. He presented her with an engagement ring, and threatened suicide when she tried to return it. Her parents liked Pat and were pleased at the prospect of a wedding, while Margaret struggled to see where her duty actually lay. She told her Mother, "I thought it was the will of God, and that I might grow to like him." Finally she took her anguish to confession, and Father Agius, SJ, knowing that her heart lay elsewhere, relieved her of her burdens. She wrote to Pat:

"Time changes all things on this earth, so if you pay attention to that first line -you will not think so much of the following. I must tell you that I am of the same opinion as on Sunday. I really wish to break with it ... I have done what God inspired me to do, to help you the little I could, to regain the light. From that point God and his Blessed Mother must have showered down blessings on you, because you have remained steadfast, and I trust God that you will continue doing so, because you know he is the only real happiness ..."

He – God – is the only real happiness. From now on this theme becomes dominant in Margaret's life. Abraham thought God wanted his only Son Isaac - and was willing to give him up. Margaret thought she was required to sacrifice her vocation in order to help another. Both were wrong; but it was the willingness of their obedience that made them precious in God's eyes.

Bella had already decided to become a Little Sister of the Poor, and when Margaret told Father

Agius that she felt drawn to the Poor Clares he encouraged her. He had doubts about her physical endurance, and so did she. So with touching naivety she practised early rising, night prayer and other forms of self-discipline. She had yet to learn that God gives his grace in the hour when it is needed.

Margaret's first choice would, naturally, have been to enter the Poor Clares at Edinburgh. The community there was experiencing a time of great struggle and difficulty, and her application was turned down. She understood the true meaning of the words of the Psalmist: forget your people and your father's house. She willingly sacrificed the nearness of family and her Scots culture, and wrote to apply to the Poor Clares in Notting Hill, London.

She did not apply to be an extern sister, she asked simply to become a Poor Clare. The recommendation of her Parish Priest and Confessor carried weight, but it was insufficient to gain her admission to the enclosure. This did not constitute a personal judgment on Margaret, for the community had not met her. They assessed her as a working class girl with little secondary education and thought the singing of the eight hours of the Divine office in Latin would be too much for her. But Margaret was also something new; she was a modern woman whose ability to work and pray had emancipated her from her background. To women who had never had to earn their living, who came, some of them, from very aristocratic and well-off families, she, and those like her who were to follow her in religious life, were something of a mystery.

The Garden of Clare

By the time Margaret came to say good-bye to her family, Bella had already entered the Little Sisters of the Poor. She traveled to London with her brother, Andrew – to another parting, for he was emigrating to Canada. She stood dressed in her best, a lonely figure on Tilbury Dock, waving his ship good-bye. She then caught the tram to Notting Hill. It was the twenty-first of July 1923. The extern sisters welcomed her, and took her to the parlour where she met Mother Felix.

Mother Mary Felix Clare of the Blessed Sacrament, Julia Vaughan, was the niece of Cardinal Vaughan and the grand-daughter of Eliza Vaughan who had prayed that all her children would have vocations. Eliza's prayer had been rewarded with six sons who became priests - among them a Cardinal, an Archbishop and a Bishop - and with four daughters who entered religion. From the remaining two sons arose second generation vocations amongst whom were Mother Felix and her cousin, Bishop Francis Vaughan of Menevia.

All the sisters of the community then came along to meet Margaret in the parlour at the enclosure grille and she was invited to sing a song. She sang a hymn to our Lady, in a pleasant, if, on this occasion, a rather trembling alto. Then Sister Gerard, the presiding extern sister, took her off to change into her long black postulant's dress, with its rather old fashioned white bonnet, and she joined the extern sisters at recreation.

Sister Gerard was a firm, motherly woman in her early forties, the equivalent of Novice-Mistress to Margaret and to her companion, Sister John, who was a novice, a year or so older than Margaret. Sister John is described as a 'tomboy' who was 'always up to tricks.' The two remaining externs, Sister Aegidia and Sister Colette were considerably older. Mother Felix made it her practice to spend Sunday afternoon in the parlour, having recreation with the sisters outside. Her straightforwardness, gentleness and humility made a great impression on Margaret, of whom she was genuinely fond. The extern Novitiate had, in addition, instruction twice weekly from the Portress, Sister Francis (Offord), who acted as liaison between the enclosure and the extern community.

Margaret was not a 'lay' sister - all Poor Clares are 'lay' sisters, in all senses of the word and they all work with their hands. The "sisters who serve outside the monastery", as St Clare calls them in her rule, did the needful shopping, listened to prayer requests, comforted those in distress, dealt courteously with the community's visitors and with beggars, tramps, and others in need at the door. They begged at nearby Portobello market for food and vegetables and quested four times a year in parts of London for alms to support the community. Asked later how she thought she might have contracted her fatal illness, she said that she felt it might have been during the quest, while sharing a seat on a bus with a poor and obviously consumptive woman who was coughing uncontrollably. It is typical of Margaret that she was too sensitive of the woman's feelings to get up and move.

The sisters prayed the Divine Office at the same time as the community, but instead of the Latin Psalms, they repeated the Lord's Prayer. On big feasts, and sometimes on other occasions when they had not been questing or doing other exhausting work, they rose at midnight for Matins, bringing before God the needs and petitions of those whom they had visited or who had called at the door. They rose extra early in the morning in order to have an undisturbed time for personal prayer before the days work began.

It was strange, and must have been difficult to Margaret, yet her letters home radiate happiness and joy. After four months the Community voted to receive her for her clothing.

She went into retreat in the quiet of her cell overlooking the garden on the feast of the Presentation, and was clothed in the habit on 11th February 1924. The family scraped together the means to come down for the day, and Margaret opened the door to them in the white dress of a bride. As a special joy, Bella, already a novice, had been permitted to come. A generous benefactor of the community gave Margaret's bride's cake and the community provided her dress, which would normally have been the gift of her family. Four little girls of the Parish, who had recently made their first communion (and thus possessed white dresses), were her bridesmaids. 'Her hair cut off, and her secular dress laid aside', she came to the grille in the Extern Chapel and received from Mother Felix her name: *Sister Mary Francis of the Five Wounds*.

Other companions

"The first time I met Sister Mary Francis was the day I entered. She was walking down the garden, and she seemed to me a very pleasant person. Generally speaking in her attitude she was always bright and cheerful and she managed to put up with difficult people very nicely..." Lily James, who entered on the 10th August 1924, was possibly the most difficult person with whom Sister Mary Francis had to "put up"! The above words are taken from recollections recorded towards the end of her life. Lily, who was to receive the habit and her religious name, Sister Mary Pacifica of Jesus, at the same service in which Sister Mary Francis would make her first vows, had been received into the Church at the age of 17. She came from a poor London family, never knew her own father, and described the step-father who resented her existence as 'sulky'. Her family were opposed to her becoming a Catholic and a nun but "they knew I never change my mind: they had to accept what I wanted". She was 19 when she entered. She found Sister Mary Francis a challenge from the start.

She was not the only one "...old Sister Aegidia used to needle her sometimes, and jibe at her Scottish accent. But she (Sister Mary Francis) never answered back." Despite this, under the watchful eye of Sister Gerard, the three young sisters managed to make a happy, if sometimes noisy family. Sent to whitewash an outhouse, they painted themselves liberally', and their shouts of glee floated over the walls to Ladbroke Grove. Sister Pacifica hanging onto the foot of the ladder, exclaimed to the energetic Scotswoman sloshing the ceiling , – "Well, you'll never be a St.!" – to which Sister Mary Francis replied, "Dinna fash yeself!" (don't let that trouble you.) And as a special treat, Sister Colette made them an afternoon cup of tea. The sisters' midday meal, a share of the community's dinner, came out from the enclosure and included an extra portion for tramps. However, if the number of tramps exceeded the number of portions, the sisters sometimes gave away their own dinners. Later, in hospital, one of the nurses asked her if she had not sometimes been hungry? She answered "Yes, but it was a real joy." Perhaps she should have said with St. Francis, "a perfect joy!"

The sisters worked in the garden, they had their own small vegetable plot, with a potato patch, a small flower garden where they grew flowers for the extern altar and a few apple trees which, the following spring, Sister Gerard taught her to prune. She was soon to know the pruning of a greater gardener.

Under the shadow of His wings

On December 27th, after a happy Christmas with his family, her father, Andrew Sinclair, was knocked down by a tram. He never recovered consciousness, and his death left his widow "quite unprovided for." There was no question of Sister Mary Francis going up to Edinburgh for his funeral, and there was no way she could support her mother, or help provide materially for the younger children still at school. She could only pray; real Franciscan poverty is to have nothing left to give but yourself, your love.

Christmas is a season of joy, and as Poor Clares we try to entertain the Christ-child who has come to earth out of His love for us. There were recreations and happy community gatherings up to the octave of the Epiphany'. The extern sisters put on a nativity play in the parlour for the sisters inside. Margaret was the Angel of the Gloria. After the play they all had collation together which the extern sisters had begged and prepared.

Through all this Sister Mary Francis never allowed her grief to burden others, she was a true child of Mother Seraphine, the Belgian foundress of the Notting Hill community, who said, "Let me see your sufferings by your smile".

She made her first profession on the 14th February 1925, and during the retreat beforehand she wrote:

"O, God, help me always to take up Thy cross cheerfully and follow Thee I desire to vow to You my poverty, chastity, and obedience, and to observe the same; to rejoice when I feel the pinch of poverty, and always remain modest and prudent, thinking of this in our Blessed lady, and how she would like it in her child."

Sister Pacifica received the habit at the same ceremony. But for Sister Mary Francis it was a day very different from her own clothing. She had no personal guests, and it was impossible for any of her family to attend. She could only offer herself, in those words of our Holy Father Francis, which St Colette quoted in her constitutions, "naked to the Crucified." As she knelt at the grille and placed her hands in those of Mother Felix while the celebrant, Father Hoare, bound them together with his stole, the one really essential guest was manifestly present - the crucified and risen Christ to whom she gave her life, her very short life.

On March 7th she developed a sore throat and could not speak. Dr. McLeod, when he called, sent her to bed. No one was anxious; it was thought that she had a touch of laryngitis. But when after a week her condition had not improved, Mother Felix felt sufficiently worried to go to the extern quarters and see her.

After tests on March 18th, Dr. McLeod diagnosed tuberculosis. He was greatly, surprised, for he had examined both her and Sister Pacifica, as was customary before her profession, and thought her as "strong as a horse." Fresh air and better food seemed to be the first step towards recovery. She was nursed by Sister Colette. On the 26th the doctor came again, and Mother Felix went out to be with her during the examination. She had looked "better," having the deceptively, bright eyes and complexion of many TB victims in the early' stages, and the sisters had clung to the hope that there might have been a mistake - but there was no mistake.

Mother Felix began searching for a nursing home, and the Sisters of Charity at Marillac House in Warley were recommended to her. On April 9th accompanied by Sister Gerard and Sister Colette she made her last journey.

The Way of the Cross

The Sisters of Charity warmed to this easily pleased patient, who always smiled, often laughed and never complained. She wrote to Mother Felix a few days after her arrival, a letter full of childlike gratitude and lonely heartache; her one desire was to come home to Notting Hill.

She stayed for nine months at Marillac House and became, in her humble way, the heart of the house. It was to her bedside that visitors were brought first. They left her cheered and often strangely touched. "She suffered," wrote the superior of Marillac House, "from prostrating weakness, from constant breathlessness and choking in the throat ... She suffered also from loneliness, from being outside her convent and away from her Mother Abbess." She could not retain food, and one of her nurses wrote "she was told that she must do so, and she was so obedient, in even the smallest things, that she would do her utmost but she never made any show of holiness; indeed it was her great reserve that impressed me most." Though she was reticent about speaking of God, the life of the Spirit blazed in her more transparently as her physical life burnt out in pain. She had one ever growing desire, as she said to her old confessor visiting her: "I want to see Him."

Her family came to see her in April and again in October. In May, death seemingly imminent, she asked for the Sacrament of Anointing which she received on the twenty-fifth. This was the day of Mother Felix's Silver Jubilee of religious profession and the knowledge that they were both renewing their vows must have been a joy to them both. Two days later Mother Felix sent Sister Gerard and Sister Pacifica to see her, the later, by her own testimony, giving a very wide berth to the contagiously ill. They found Sister Mary Francis much better. They had brought with them an apple from the tree that she had pruned - like a symbol of Paradise soon to be regained. She rallied, but in November death closed in.

As she grew weaker, each breath became an agony; however, she asked that she might be permitted to die in her habit, and when the end came this was granted her. She said, "***If I can gain one soul for Jesus it will be worth it all.***" She clasped her Crucifix and a copy of her vows and those by her side heard her pray many times the Holy, Name, "Jesus", and the prayers, "Jesus, forgive me my sins" and "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul."

Sister Death came for her at about 3:30 on the morning of the 24th November 1925. She was still smiling.

Laurels

At Notting Hill the sisters waited with lighted candles to escort her body to the chapel. They noted the radiant serenity of her face in death. When her body was brought to the grille some among those present noticed the fragrance of violets, though no flowers had yet arrived.

Mother Felix had written to break the news to Elizabeth Sinclair: "Our dear little child has gone at last to her reward, and how happy she must be after her life of love and union with her Beloved. One cannot think of her anywhere but in heaven....

Her family were unable come down for her funeral, and there were only a few people present when, just before the Requiem, her coffin was opened and the traditional wreath of evergreen laurels was placed on her brow. It was snowing as Sister Gerard and the extern sisters stood with a few friends of the community and a few casual passers-by, for the final prayers by the graveside at Kensal Green. At home the community was making the Way of the Cross. Sister Gerard placed the wreath of flowers, bought with a hard earned pound note sent by Elizabeth on the coffin as it was lowered into the grave.

The first canonised St. was the thief who looked from his cross on a God who was "despised and rejected by men." The thief was pinned out in his own agony. There was no good deed he could do to testify, to his faith in Christ: he could only say, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." Like the good thief, Sister Mary Francis' life was built on faith. She was not visited by God with visions, she had no deep theological insights into scripture, she did no ostentatious heroics and performed no immediately visible miracles; (though she made up for it after her death! !) She was like a million other ordinary people in all but one respect - obedient love. The one thing necessary. Very few of us, when it comes to it, reach God by visions and heroics. *That is why Sister Mary Francis is a sign for our times and a St. for the future*, for her life has shown us what really matters.

Sunshine after hard frost

In her letter to Elizabeth Sinclair describing the funeral Mother Felix wrote:

"I am sure Sister Mary Francis will do much for us from heaven. One cannot but feel very happy about her - and I am sure - you do The sun is shining as I write, after hard frost, and I think of what must be the brightness of God, which has shone on that pure soul, fresh from the consecration of her vows to Him... "

However, in Mother Felix's mind there was a gap between feeling confident that Sister Mary Francis was a St. with the Lord in heaven and wanting to see her raised to the altars. Mother Felix had great respect for Saints who saw God and spoke with Him face to face, women like St. Gertrude and St. Mechthilde were what she called "real Saints". But St. Therese of Lisieux, was a mystery to her; she was at a loss as to why the Church wanted to canonise her, asking, "but what did she do?" Like Sister Mary Francis, St. Therese did next to nothing. It was what they were that showed the face of Christ to their time.

Sister Gerard, who best knew Sister Mary Francis in her life as a Poor Clare, died also of TB two years after her. Sister John died before her 30th birthday of cancer. By the time the diocesan process was opened Sister Pacifica, who by this time was an extern sister in Hawarden, was the only survivor. All her life she struggled with her resentment.

"Why", she once asked a sister who was nursing her, "does she get all the attention? Why is she supposed to be a St. and not me?" The sister answered gently "You too can be a St. you know..."

The Lord took Sister Mary Francis at the age of 25. Sister Pacifica struggled with her failings for the better part of 90 years, the last 8 of which were bedridden. She was terribly afraid of death. Much earlier, we had recorded her memories of Sister Mary Francis, on which some of the foregoing is based. To a Sister, called to the infirmary to help lift her, she said, "I am praying to Sister Mary Francis to help me have a happy death!" We were really amazed - and we knew that the end must be near.

Sister Pacifica died on the 12th December 1995, surrounded by the sisters who had nursed her with so much love. Her last prayer was, "Jesus teach me to love you." We were very sure Sister Mary Francis had prayed for her!

On 6th February 1978, Sister Mary Francis was declared Venerable by Pope Paul IV.

Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Britain in 1982 visited St. Joseph's Hospice in Rosewall; he ended by saying:

"Margaret could well be described as one of God's little ones who, through her very simplicity, was touched by God with the strength of real holiness of life, whether as a child, a young woman, an apprentice, a factory worker, member of a trade union, or a professed sister in religion... I fully appreciate the aspirations of the Catholics of Scotland, and elsewhere, for that singular event to be realised, and I know you are praying that it may come about. With this recollection of the Venerable Margaret Sinclair, I leave you with her inspiration!"

Let us pray

Heavenly Father,
the Venerable Margaret was one of the poor in spirit,
a dustman's daughter born in a backstreet.
She gave up her fiancée to follow you as a Poor Clare,
and she died in obscurity with great suffering.
Teach us to give our selves completely to you, Lord,
and through the intercession of your handmaid,
the Venerable Margaret,
grant us that grace for
which we now ask you....

Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever.
Amen.



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