

Chapter 2 Interlude 1934-1947

Guided by a prayerful consideration of the needs of our times and the demands for our mission as educators, mindful too of Mother McAuley's concern for women, the Sisters of Mercy dared to respond with courage and compassion to undertake the founding of the first Catholic college for women in the State of Rhode Island.

It is the nature of the Mercy charism to become so diffusive in its effects that it becomes an integral part of all that it touches. It is within this context that we presume to interpret the inner meaning of the flow of events that is the content of the history of Salve Regina College.

In order to appreciate the unusual set of circumstances that marked the initial efforts within the years 1934-1947, we must look at the cultural, political, and economic forces that influenced American society, thus challenging a Mercy response. It was, in many respects, an age of paradox, years of social and artistic accomplishments as well as years of revolt and repudiation.²¹

In the field of education this era was distinguished by a kind of renaissance of American scholarship and research in many fields of intellectual endeavor, ²² resulting in the expansion of American colleges and universities both public and private.²³ Due to the extraordinary increase in the number of students, the curricula came to be modified to prepare students for careers in industry and business as well as the professions.

On the other hand, these years after World War I saw a kind of postwar rebellion in manners and morals as well as the initiation of the first steps in the emancipation of women. Women came to be employed in industry, in the schools, in business, rather than on the farm or in domestic service.²⁴ Thus, the growth in the number of colleges, the revolution in morals, the changing roles of women in society were, indeed, powerful signs of the need for a Mercy response.

²¹ Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States since the 1890's*, 3d ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), p. 272

²² Link, p. 277

²³ Link, p. 292

²⁴ Link, p. 274

The Mercy community was ready to meet this challenge because of its outstanding endeavors in the field of education in the Diocese of Providence²⁵ and the support of Bishop William A. Hickey, who, in the course of his bishopric between 1919 and 1933, stressed the need for Catholic schools from elementary grades to college.²⁶

As early as 1919, college classes for the Sisters were conducted at St. Xavier Academy by the Dominican Fathers from Providence College. By 1926 the Sisters completed their first degree work and were graduated from Providence College. Among them were Mother Mary Hilda Miley, later President of Salve Regina College; and Sister Mary James O'Hare, its first dean.²⁷ The relationship between Providence College and Salve Regina College found its concrete expression in laying the foundation for the higher education of the Sisters that was to come to fruition twenty-one years later. For this we are forever grateful.

Despite the positive factors that made these years remarkable in the field of education, political and economic tensions brought about a financial crises that profoundly affected universities and colleges, particularly between 1931 and 1934.²⁸

It was at this time that plans for the college began to materialize. To some, such a decision might have appeared presumptuous. But to those imbued with the charism of Mercy, need was the touchstone, ministry the response, and courage the vitalizing force. Indeed, the idea of a college for women was no ephemeral fancy. Mother McAuley herself made the education of women one of her priorities.²⁹ The history of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States shows that eighteen Mercy colleges have been established in the twentieth century.³⁰ Moreover, the very possibility of the existence of Salve Regina College is due in particular to Mother Mary Hilda Miley, who was the prime mover in securing the Charter and who persevered in her dream of its becoming a reality in spite of what appeared insuperable difficulties. It was she who gave its name, inspired by her daily recitation of that ancient prayer, the Salve Regina.

On January 30, 1934, the petition for the charter was presented to the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island. The bill was introduced by Edmund Flynn, Democratic floor leader, and Judge Walter Curry,

²⁵ Mary Loretto O'Connor, RSM, *Mercy Marks the Century* (Providence, R.I.: Sisters of Mercy, 1951), p. 135 ff.

²⁶ Thomas Cullen, *The Catholic Church in Rhode Island* (Providence, R.I.: Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, 1936), p.190

²⁷ Donna T. McCaffrey, *The Origins of the Early History of Providence College Through 1947* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Microfilms International, 1985), p. 209

²⁸ Link, p. 371

²⁹ Regan and Keiss, pp. 88-89

³⁰ *Directory, Association of Mercy Colleges Newsletter, 1989-1990*

representative from Newport. The bill was then referred to Mr. James Kiernan, Chairman of the Committee on Corporations.

The original incorporators were as follows:

- Daniel Galliher (Reverend Daniel M. Galliher, O.P., Dean of Providence College)
- Charles Carroll (Dr. Charles Carroll, Chief of the Division of Promotion and Supervision of the Rhode Island Department of Education)
- Marie Hartman (Mother Mary Carmelita Hartman, Mother General of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States)
- Catherine M. Doyle (Mother Mary Matthew, Mother Provincial of the Sisters of Mercy of Providence)
- Mary E. Hitchman (Mother Mary Mercedes)
- Ann L. Cobb (Sister Mary Loretto)
- Marie E. McElroy (Sister Mary Basilia)
- Julia Donnelly (Sister Mary Alexis)
- Mary Scallon (Sister Mary Imelda)
- Catherine Mallon (Sister Mary Austin)
- Bridget Corrigan (Sister Mary Teresita)

Monsignor Peter E. Blessing was acting as the Vicar of the Diocese of Providence in the interim between the death of Bishop William A. Hickey, who died October 4, 1933, and the consecration of Bishop Francis P. Keough on February 12, 1934.

Both branches of the General Assembly unanimously passed the bill for the Charter, the House of Representatives on February 2, 1934, the Senate on March 16, 1934, and His Excellency, the Governor of the State of Rhode Island, Theodore Francis Green approved it on March 19, 1934.

The first meeting for the inauguration of the corporation of Salve Regina College was held on July 13, 1934, at St. Xavier Convent. At this time Bishop Keough was elected as a member of the Members-of-the-Corporation. Then followed the election of the Officers of the Corporation:

President of the Corporation and Chairman of the Members-of-the-Corporation: Mother General of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States, Mother Mary Carmelita Hartman

First Vice-President and First Vice-Chairman of the Members-of-the-Corporation: Mother Provincial of the Sisters of Mercy of Province of Providence, Mother Mary Matthew Doyle

Second Vice-President: Mother Mary Mercedes Hitchman

Treasurer: Mother Mary Matthew

At this meeting the Board of Directors was also created and vested with the full powers of the Corporation. This group, composed of Monsignor Peter E. Blessing as Chairman, Doctor Charles Carroll, Reverend Daniel M. Galliher, O.P., Mother Mary Matthew Doyle, Sister M. Loretto Cobb and Sister Mary Hilda Miley, were commissioned to draw up the by-laws, arrange a course of study, prepare a seal, and attend to other matters pertaining to conducting the affairs of the College.

At this juncture, it is important to note that in a letter dated July 25, 1934, the Mother General, Mother Mary Carmelita Hartman, upon receiving the minutes of the first meeting of the Corporation, sought explicit information as to the status of the administration of the college. To quote:

The status of the College is not quite clear to me. Please state explicitly whether the College is to be a diocesan institution or whether the administration of it is to be controlled entirely by the Sisters of Mercy of Providence.

I am aware that the late Bishop Hickey favored opening a diocesan college for women and I know that you did not approve this plan. I am of the same opinion as you are regarding a college administered by the diocese and would never sanction the Sisters being part of such an organization.

Mother Mary Matthew, in her reply of July 28, 1934, hastened to assure her that the College was to be controlled by the Sisters of Mercy of the Province of Providence according to the expressed intent of the Bishop and the Board of Directors.

At the first meeting of the Board of Directors held on July 27, 1934, at St. Xavier Convent, it was voted to accept the seal of the College. The seal depicts Our Lady of Mercy enclosed in a circle and standing before a cross. Around Our Lady's head is inscribed the motto: *Maria Spes Nostra, Mary our Hope*. On one side of the base is pictured the lamp of learning and on the other the book of learning. The entire circle is inscribed with the words: *Salve Regina Sigillum Collegii MCMXXXIV*.

This seal, according to the by-laws, shall be affixed to all official and public documents and degrees prepared by the College. Thus, the image of Our Lady is forever to be the official sign and symbol of all our endeavors and the visible expression of the source of our hope. Sister Mary Mercedes Quinton executed its design, and the seal was a gift to the College by the generosity of Dr. Charles Carroll of the Board of Directors.

By April 15, 1935, Father Galliher and Dr. Carroll, both renowned educators, submitted a course of study which not only included general education requirements but also possible areas of concentration. At the Corporation meeting held May 16, 1935, the seal, by-laws, and course of study were sanctioned. This was to be the last Corporation meeting Dr. Carroll was to attend, for he died on February 4, 1936.

At the Annual Meeting held on May 26, 1936, Chief Justice Edmund Flynn replaced Dr. Carroll as a Member-of-the-Corporation. Because of vacancies in the membership of the Corporation due to the resignation of some Sisters, the following were elected as new members:

- Mary E. Ormond (Sister Mary Albeus)
- Isabelle Donovan (Sister Mary Admirabilis)
- Ellen Hines (Sister Mary Ignatius)
- Mary O'Hare (Sister Mary James)
- Ellen Scanlan (Sister Mary Evangelista)³¹

Perhaps the most significant item on the agenda of the meeting held on May 20, 1937, was the proposal to open Salve Regina College exclusively for religious at Mount St. Rita, while awaiting the erection of a suitable building to accommodate young ladies. The proposal was rejected. Not until the Annual Meeting held on May 19, 1944, do we find that a special committee, composed of Mother Mary Matthew, Mother Mary Hilda, and Sister Mary Loretto, was formed with the sole objective of revising the 1937 proposal in order to insure the accommodation of a student population. Within this time period there were many rumors circulating as to the possible site for the would-be college, preferably within the environs of Providence and close to Providence College. Some consideration, it is said, was given to the use of community property attached to Bay View Academy in Riverside; other options included the land that is now the site of Fatima Hospital. Even the Blithewood estate in Bristol, it seems, was suggested.

As we look back at the correspondence and the minutes of the meetings held in the interim between 1935 and 1947, we are amazed at the perseverance and persistence of all those who gave their time, energy, and support to an entity that had existence only on paper--this in spite of the fact that by this time our country was engaged in the Second World War. Indeed, of ten possible Corporation meetings that might have been held between 1937 and 1947, only four were held. The other six were waived because of no business.

Nevertheless, positive and practical steps were being taken in the meantime to ensure a professionally qualified faculty. By the time the College opened there were five Sisters with Ph.D.'s and twelve with Master's degrees from such institutions as Boston College and the Catholic University of America. These degrees represented professional competency in such areas as French, Latin, English, mathematics, and science.³² Moreover, the accumulation of suitable acquisitions for the library was initiated under the capable

³¹ In July 1935, New York became an independent province resulting in the need to elect new members of the Corporation.

³² O'Connor, p. 159

direction of Sister Marie Therese LeBeau. By the time the College opened, the book holdings numbered 2,400.³³

Our situation was, indeed, unique. We had a Charter, a Corporation, a seal, a course of study, by-laws, a qualified faculty. We even had the nucleus of a library and some prospective students. We were without land, buildings, and sufficient funds. Were we watering the proverbial stick?

What to some appeared foolishness came to be the wisdom and power of God at work within fortuitous events that marked this period of our history.

³³ With the exception of the references cited, all sources in this chapter are found in the Salve Regina University Archives.