

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the report of the Rev. Fr. Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Trials of the Notre Dame Sisters in Cambridge



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—By the early 1870s, the reputation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur had spread across most of Massachusetts. Sometime between 1870 and 1872, Fr. Thomas Scully, the pastor of St. Mary's Church in Cambridge asked Sr. Louise, the Provincial for the Eastern United States, for sisters to come to his parish to take over the girls' school. Unfortunately, there weren't enough sisters to fill such a need. Unwilling to wait, Fr. Scully instead asked five sisters from the Notre Dame Congregation in Montreal to manage the school.

But in 1876, Fr. Scully's wait was over. Four Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were ready to travel from Cincinnati to Cambridge to manage the girls' parish school. They arrived on August 24, 1876, little knowing what awaited them.

The first day in the parish gave the sisters a hint of what life would be like in their new home. After a welcoming Mass, the sisters received a continuous deluge of visitors to the convent. By 7 p.m., they were finally able to breathe a sigh of relief and closed their convent door with the hope of a quiet evening. But just a few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. It was Fr. Scully asking them to take charge of the Ladies Sodality at once. The confused sisters followed him to the church where they found over 400 women awaiting their arrival.

Finally at 9 p.m., the sisters managed to return to their convent, but rest was not found that night. The bedsheets had not been washed and were so stiff that no sister could sleep. Each of the four sisters were convinced that the others had fallen asleep, and "each one tried to keep quiet believing her companion asleep, but a sigh, an ejaculation or a turn in the bed revealed that she too was awake. We slept on the floor and when we turned it sounded as if we were tossing in shavings; the mosquitoes also charmed us with their buzz whilst they annoyed us with their stings; added to all this the town clock of a neighboring Methodist church warned us of the lapse of time as it counted the hours."

The next week offered no reprieve. The house had to be organized and plans for lessons made. School began on September 4th and the four sisters had charge of 390 children, with more enrolling every few days. Sister Louise sent them another sister before the end of September, but they had to wait until 1877 for the arrival of a sixth teacher to assist in the classrooms. With all the sisters involved, not only in teaching, but in managing the Sodality, preparing the children for First Communion and the necessary household duties, they had little time for anything else. And when visitors called at the convent, their knocks went unanswered, causing one of the students to suggest a sign should be posted, informing visitors that the sisters could only be found at the school.

Despite their exhausting schedule, the annalist always mentioned the amazing support the parishioners gave to all of the sisters in their work. And then on November 29, 1876, the pastor asked the sisters for one more favor—to assist in the parish fair. Because of their already full schedule, they felt they had no recourse but to say no. Not used to be refused, Fr. Scully took offense. Though the sisters saw his anger, they *“tried to laugh it away.”* Little did they know it was only the beginning.

At the end of their first year of teaching in Cambridge, the pastor once again asked the sisters to be present at an event, this time at the closing ceremonies, held on July 3rd. But classes had already ended on June 30th and the sisters were in the midst of preparations to leave that very day for their summer retreat. They were unable to attend and once again, Fr. Scully had been refused by the sisters.

The next school year began with a higher enrollment and they were grateful to have seven sisters in the convent. During the fall, however, they had made some changes with regard to classrooms, etc., as transfers brought in new sisters. And so when the usual Thanksgiving parish fair was announced, Fr. Scully again asked the sisters to help. Once again, they felt they had to refuse, *“though we did every other thing in our power to make it a success.”*

Having been refused by the sisters for the third time, Fr. Scully made his displeasure known soon enough. *“A New Year ever to be remembered by its consequence, up to this period the Rev. Fathers came on Sundays and holy days of obligation at 6 o’clock in the morning to give us Holy Communion. This day however no one came; thinking the Rev. gentlemen had gone, a Sister was sent to ask one of them if they could come. One came but in so ungentlemanly a manner as to raise serious fears which were soon realized. That our mass was changed and we were told that if we wanted Holy Communion on said days we should have to go to the church.”*

Things grew worse during the month of May 1879 when the Superior left for a trip to Cincinnati to discuss the situation with Sr. Louise, the Provincial for the Eastern U.S. While gone, Fr. Scully insisted the sisters change the scheduling for First Communion and also how they managed the Sodalties. By the time the Superior returned, she learned her suspicions were correct, *“that the man wished to meddle in the community matters and I had [only] recourse to God.”*

Things settled down for a while, though tensions continued. The reports of the discord between the pastor and the sisters reached the ears of one reporter for the *Boston Globe*. In an article published on Jan. 4, 1880, the reporter wrote that *“he [Fr. Scully] made a statement to some of his parishioners compromising the reputation of . . .the lady teachers [the sisters]. . .and that while the proof is doubtful, the animus seems sure.”*

Though little is said by the annalist for the next several months, when school re-opened in September with more than 600 children, the sisters were startled to discover that workmen had arrived to expand the classrooms. The Annalist was taken aback by this development and wrote *“that the reverend gentlemen acted so strangely although they were making new classrooms for girls. They never even said so or if we had any suggestions to give. . .”*

Sad to say, the tensions never eased. In December, the Superior inadvertently offended the pastor again by missing one of the Children’s Masses, and in retribution Fr. Scully made sure not to invite the sisters to one of the St. Thomas day celebrations. Things had to have been very uncomfortable, because Annalists and Superiors of the Convents during those years never wrote an unkind word about the any of the pastors. And in uncharacteristic form, the Superior’s comments on Fr. Scully exposed just how bad things had gotten. *“My first and principal reason was to prevent him from meddling in the community matters. He is a man who would do it in a moment if it occurred to his mind, he is all for show.”*

Though things never completely became amicable, as the years passed, an uneasy truce seems to have settled on both the priests and the sisters. Eventually, a new convent was completed and the sisters went into the 20th century with more peace than they’d had when they began their ministry in Cambridge.



Sisters of Notre Dame Convent
Cambridge, MA

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ St. Mary’s Convent Annals, Cambridge, MA 1876-1919.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2021.