

## Convent

Following the sudden demise of her fiancé Charles Holmes during 1853 she entered an Anglican nuns convent at Puseyite in Devonport. However, she was disappointed by not being allowed to go to the Crimea. She converted to Roman Catholicism, was received into the church by Cardinal Wiseman. She joined the Poor Clare's sisters in Newry, Co. Down, then took the name of Sr. Mary Francis Clare. (*Fr. Goaley*) [\[iv\]](#)

Margaret joined the Puseyite Anglican nuns on the death of her fiancé at the Devonport Convent founded by Mrs. Siddons. She was disappointed not to have been sent to the Crimea. She converted to Catholicism, was received by Cardinal Wiseman during 1858. She became a Catholic nun at the Convent of St. Clare in Newry co. Down. (*Birtchnell*) [\[v\]](#)

With the loss of her fiancé Charles Holmes she enrolled in the Anglican Sellanite Sisterhood under Dr. Pusey. Sometime later she converted to Catholicism. Aged thirty she transferred to a Staffordshire Convent of the Sisters of Penance. Dissatisfied there she withdrew then moved to the Poor Clare's Convent in Newry, Co. Down. She spent several successful years writing plus publishing her work that included the Lives of the Saints - Francis, Clare, St. Patrick, two volumes of Irish History also the Local History of Cork & Kerry, a study of Daniel O'Connell also she produced a series of articles on poor girls plights. It was reported she produced over fifty books & pamphlets during her life. [\[vi\]](#)

## Kerry

Sr. Clare Francis was invited to establish a convent in Kerry during 1861. With six sisters she resided at Rose Cottage in Kenmare while the convent was being built. Following the great Famine of 1845 - 1879 she wrote strongly against landlordism & poverty. She set up a school in Kenmare for young girls' education. She fed & clothed them, trained them in knitting, weaving, embroidery with other skills. As a prolific writer she founded Kenmare publications also employed two secretaries for full - time correspondence. Thirty - five books were published re advocacy of woman's rights / social injustice. She left Kenmare in November in 1881 to return to the Mother House in Newry. (*Fr. Goaley*) [\[vii\]](#)

During 1861 she was sent to Kenmare in Co. Kerry to establish a Poor Clare Convent. Whilst there, in less than ten years she penned thirty – five books that included several texts on Irish history, two hundred thousand volumes of her work were printed by Kenmare publications. (*Birtchnell*) [\[viii\]](#)

In the special collections & archives at the Russel Library in St. Patrick's College Maynooth, Co. Kildare they hold several of Mother Francis Clare's publications. She had an energetic determined, strong – willed personality with a business acumen possibly unsuited to convent living of an enclosed order. She encountered conflict with local landlords or Catholic clerical hierarchy also her own religious superiors. This site also recalls her personal & her social life's work, it includes an image. (*Olive Morrin 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2017*) [\[ix\]](#)

Sr. Clare Francis in October 1871 was invited to form a new Poor Clare Foundation at Kenmare in Kerry. Along with her social duties she used her time writing requests for funding also to expose the landlord system of the era, this however created enemies especially the local P. P. Archdeacon Higgins, he succeeded in her being ostracized from her community then recalled to the Newry Convent. [\[x\]](#)

## Publications

St. Francis Clare's fictional works included: *Tim Halloran's Choice, or from Killarney to New York* 1877 (*Gill & Son, Dublin*), *Who Fired the First Shot or Ned Rusheen; An Irish Story* 1883 (*Burns Oates & Co. London*) & *His Yarn, and Another Story* 1897 (*Marshall, Russel & Co.*) Her religious works included: *The Trias Thaumaturga; or Three - Wonder - working Saints of Ireland* 1878 (*John G.*

Murdock London), *The Case of Ireland Stated: A Plea for My People and My Race* 1880 (M. H. Gill & Co.) Her Social & Historical works included: *Woman's Work in Modern Society* 1872 (Kenmare Publications), *Speeches and Letters of O'Connell, with preface and historical notes* 1875 (2 Vols in 1) (Mc Glasha Dublin) Autobiographies included: *Five Years in a Protestant Sisterhood and ten years in a Catholic Convent: An Autobiography* 1869 (Longman's Green), *The Nun of Kenmare: An Autobiography* 1888 (Jonah Child London), *Life inside the Church of Rome* 1889 (Hodder & Stoughton London) & *The Story of My Life* 1891 (Hodder & Stoughton London) (Birtchnell) [xi]

This page lists several of Mother Clare's written works: <https://csjp.org/about-us/our-roots/writings-of-mother-francis-clare>

She was a prolific author who penned biographies of saints, pontiffs, prelates & nationalistic leaders. (*Mags Gargan 14<sup>th</sup> August 2014*) [xii]

### **Knock**

Following the Apparition in Knock in August 1879 Sr. Francis Clare produced two pamphlets in support. It was reported that several letters had been received by her from Archdeacon Cavanagh with the hope she could assist Knock village as she had already done in Kenmare. Aged fifty – two years she arrived in Knock on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1881. Initially she was warmly welcomed by Archdeacon Cavanagh as he then encouraged her to become founder of a religious community also to spread the great news of the Apparition to the increasing number of pilgrims. The Archbishop of Tuam, Dr. John McEvelly was supportive of her assistance in his diocese. He provided permission for the establishment of a convent at Knock once there would be a satisfactory amount of cash to complete a building plus to provide for the sisters. He received a letter in mid – December that Sr. Francis Clare had left her convent in Kenmare without permission: that she was a 'runaway nun,' he advised her to contact the Bishop of Dromore for a letter of transfer. On complying with the request, she resided during 1882 with the Sisters of Mercy in Claremorris while awaiting the completion of her own convent at Knock. She was in favour of the aims of Ireland's Land League which contributed to a rift with both the bishop & archdeacon. She challenged Archdeacon Cavanaugh on some of his claims of 'cures' as she did not believe them miraculous. He also was angered she did not invite him to be manager of her convent school! Whilst at her short time at Knock she encountered several obstacles yet was successful in the setting up of an industrial school for forty girls. Her intention had been to train them in growing vegetables, also looking after poultry. Along with her postulants ran a pre – school for over one hundred children. This departure evoked considerable disappointment among the local people when she decided it was time to move to another location. Work on the Convent had been in progress with rafters in place on unroofed building unfortunately it was allowed to decay, part of it was later used as a handball alley. In *The Tuam Herald* it was reported that 'we all here regret the departure of the good – working and noble woman who was doing so much to raise us intellectually, but whose efforts were foiled and frustrated.' Sr. Clare bid farewell to Mayo on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1883. (*Fr. Goaley*) [xiii]

Her first visit to Knock occurred on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1881. She declared she had been cured of rheumatism also was a visionary. She was invited by Archdeacon & P. P. Fr. Kavanaugh to establish an order in Knock. She brought five sisters from Kenmare also recruited several more sisters: she acted as mother abbess of St. Joseph's Convent. She negotiated for part of her dowry from the Poor Clare's. While in Knock again she raised funds from America. She conflicted with the Archbishop of Galway McEvelly also P/P / Archdeacon Cavanagh after several months. (*Birtchnell*) [xiv]

From 1881 - 1883 St. Francis Clare began several ambitious programmes to develop Knock Shrine that included a building project to construct an abbey opposite Knock Parish Church. This was to house a new community of female religious for the purpose of promoting the shrine for visiting pilgrims plus to establish an industrial school. She had written *The Life of the Blessed Virgin* with the proceeds from

its sale she intended to raise funds for Knock. She applied to her Kenmare convent to release her dowry: however, this resulted in a bitter dispute with a financial settlement. During 1885 she published a pamphlet *Why I Left Kenmare*. (Gargan) [\[xv\]](#)

Sr. Francis Clare began another phase of her extraordinary life in at Knock in County Mayo during the 1880's. There she intended to form a Poor Clare Foundation of the Sisters of Peace. She also raised funds, promoted the Apparition. Yet once again in this location she encountered difficulties with the Hierarchy because her proposed projects did not meet with their approval. She left on her departure to England an impressive number of buildings, two schools also a convent. [\[xvi\]](#)

### **New Congregation**

Prior to 1883 she had requested a dispensation from her Poor Clare vows to enable her to start a new Congregation of the Sisters of Peace. She left Ireland for Birmingham where her new order was sanctioned by Bishop Bagshawe of Birmingham. On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1884 with Sr. M. Evangelista & Sr. Rose (*sisters from Knock*) they took their vows at Nottingham Cathedral. The order's first convent was opened at Grimsby: with the Mother House as a novitiate were established at the Sacred Heart Convent where she now became Mother Clare. (Fr. Goaley) [\[xvii\]](#)

Mother Clare sought advice from Bishop Manning, who advised her to contact the Bishop of Nottingham, England: the Bishop invited her to re – establish her community there. Pope Leo X111 dispensed her from her Poor Clare vows. He provided her with permission to establish the Sisters of Peace in Jersey City, USA. (Birtchnell) [\[xviii\]](#)

She travelled to London to consult with friends re a new project. She appealed to the Bishop of Nottingham to make a foundation for his diocese. Five novices joined her during 1884 for her new Mission in Lincolnshire. (Gargan) [\[xix\]](#)

During February 1884 Sr. Francis Clare applied for a dispensation to Rome from her vows. The investigation by Roman Authorities provided the various perceptions of all who had encountered her regarding her intentions or her actions. Her application proved successful. [\[xx\]](#)

### **U.S.**

She had a thirty minutes private audience with Pope Leo X111 in which he provided his approval also agreed with her plan to set up a home for Irish immigrant girls in the United States. During November 1884 Mother Clare with Sr. Evangelista also Sr. Ignatius Casserly sailed to the U.S. to raise funds. Her plan was to meet with Archbishop Corrigan in New York. Due to the coverage of her Irish work he refused to meet her. She was permitted to settle in Jersey City by Bishop Wiggger of the Diocese of Newark. A house was purchased on 78 Grand Street during 1885 for immigrant girls or orphans. A Convent was founded at 235 Grove Street for her Order of Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. According to her biography '*her aim was to establish a chain of residences for immigrant girls where they might find help in getting jobs and protection from exploitation and unhealthy living conditions.*' Mother Clare organized an employment bureau, training programmes, a children's day – care service plus a rest home for women. With her writings also her direct appeals she was successful in attracting financial support also additional woman who wished to join her religious community. Her radical views on social issues, education plus women's rights again angered the Catholic Church & clergy, she was criticized by the U.S. Bishops. The years 1886 - 1890 were years filled with much turmoil, uncertainty for her along with her sisters with a constant struggle with the ecclesiastical authorities. She decided that the work of the congregation could not continue if she remains in charge, this resulted in her resignation during 1888. One of her contemporaries noted that '*No doubt, her persistence in trying to justify herself, her work, and her position and her refusal to take lessons in humility, did not make her popular with the*

*Catholic Bishops in the U. S. Her reputation as an articulate, able independent – minded woman and a nun driven by a strong and caring social conscience brough her into conflict once again with the Institutional church.’* Sr. Evangelista Gaffney took charge, became their reverend mother then they continued to focus on education in New Jersey. She was followed by several sisters ie Mother Mary Casserley, Sister Mary Teresa Moran Sr. Stanislaus Tight etc. They were responsible for several houses for the poor, abused or homeless girls while the State and Federal Government Agencies provided funding. (Fr. Goaley) [\[xxi\]](#)

She established shelters in America plus vocational schools for female emigrants. Eventually, again she provoked hostility among the Catholic clergy during 1882. (Birtchnell) [\[xviii\]](#)

She travelled to London to consult with friends re a new project. She appealed to the Bishop of Nottingham to make a foundation for his diocese. Five novices joined her during 1884 for her new Mission in Lincolnshire. (Mags Gargan 14<sup>th</sup> August 2014) [\[xix\]](#)

During February 1884 Sr. Francis Clare applied for a dispensation to Rome form her vows. The investigation by Roman authorities provided the various perceptions of all who had encountered her regarding her intentions or her actions. Her application proved successful. [\[xx\]](#)

During 1886 Mother Francis Clare travelled to America instructed to raise funds for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace by Bishop Bagshawe of Birmingham. She was welcomed by Dr. Wiggger of Newark, New Jersey. A holiday house for girls, several training centres were formed. She produced her first autobiography *The Nun of Kenmare* during 1889. She resigned from her religious community due to her belief that the Order would not prosper under her leadership with the constant clerical interference. [\[xxiii\]](#)

This PDF states that she founded a community dedicated to peace, but her own life was often far from peaceful. A beloved advocate for the poor and powerless especially for Irish women & children who were victims of oppression but she was opposed in her great works by landlords & clergy. It has quotes from Mother Francis Clare i.e. *‘The very name of the Sisters of Peace will...inspire the desire for peace and a love for it,’ ‘The poor were out of the question altogether,’ ‘I did not believe in offering the Gospel of Talk to a starving people.’* There is an image also of her within this article. A PDF of *We Carry on the Healing* by Susan Dewitt CSJP is available to view at this link: <https://www.peacehealth.org/heritage-and-history>

## **England**

Once more Mother Clare made a decision that was to change her life. During 1891 she returned to England. She left the Catholic faith. She was exhausted also very disillusioned with the patriarchal church members who had thwarted her ambitious projects. She dearly missed her congregation in the U. S. sisters but kept in touch with them. She then re - joined her friends in the Church of England. (Fr. Goaley) [\[xxiv\]](#)

She returned to England. She penned several essays & lectures until her final illness. (Birtchnell) [\[xxv\]](#)

Mother Clare returned to England, left the Catholic Church then proceeded to lecture on her experiences to mainly Protestant audiences. During 1895 she converted to Methodism. One of her final writings during 1910: *Revolution & War: the Secret Conspiracy of the Jesuits in Rome* portrayed her anti – clerical beliefs in the Church of Rome. [\[xxvi\]](#)

## **Demise**

Mother Francis Clare Cusack, the *Nun of Kenmare*, formally founder of the Poor Clare convent of Kenmare, the Mother House of Newry also foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace passed away on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1889. She was interred in the Church of England cemetery at Leamington Spa in Warwickshire, England. (Fr. Goaley) [\[xxvii\]](#)

Her demise occurred on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1889 amongst the Methodist community. (Birtchnell) [\[xxviii\]](#)

Mother Clare's demise occurred on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1889 at the home of evangelical friends at 21 Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. [\[xxix\]](#)

## Legacy

True to Mother Clare's vision the work she began in the U. S has continued with further convents in Haiti, Canada & the United Kingdom where they assist with housing, day – care, job – training, protection of homeless women & children, care of the aged & blind. (Fr. Goaley) [\[xxx\]](#)

In an article titled *Forgotten nun back to hold up her corner* by Frank Mc Donald in *The Irish Times* 1<sup>st</sup> April 1998 he reported that 'An Irish nun who had been virtually air – brushed out of history has now 'achieved the recognition she deserves' with a bronze plaque unveiled in her honour near her birthplace in central Dublin. She was born at the corner of York Street & Mercer Street - now Cusack Street. Mother Mary Francis Clare was honoured by Pope Leo X111 for her Famine Relief Fund during 1879. Unfortunately, due to her work for women's liberation she was 'effaced' as the foundress of her St. Joseph of Peace order. It was the late 1960's before she was reinstated as the founder. She spent the last ten years of her life writing & lecturing. [\[xxxi\]](#)

Mother Francis Clare was a woman of great energy, determination, charm plus strong – willed. She became known for her outspoken political views & criticism of the clerical hierarchy in her declaration of social justice, her income from book with her famine relief work throughout Ireland. (Gargan) [\[xxxii\]](#)

## Footnotes

[\[iv\]](#) Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009

[\[v\]](#) Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]

[\[vi\]](#) Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]

[\[vii\]](#) Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009

[\[viii\]](#) Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]

[\[ix\]](#) The Nun of Kenmare (<https://mulibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]

[\[x\]](#) Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]

[\[xi\]](#) Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]

[\[xii\]](#) The Nun of Kenmare (<https://www.irishcatholic.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]

[\[xiii\]](#) Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009

[\[xiv\]](#) Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]

- [xv] The Nun of Kenmare (<https://www.irishcatholic.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xvi] Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xvii] *Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009*
- [xviii] Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]
- [xix] The Nun of Kenmare (<https://www.irishcatholic.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xx] Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xxi] *Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009*
- [xxii] Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]
- [xxiii] Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xxiv] *Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009*
- [xxv] Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]
- [xxvi] Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xxvii] *Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009*
- [xxviii] Margaret Cusack (<http://www.ricorso.net/>) [Assessed 12th August 2020]
- [xxix] Cusack Anna (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>) [Assessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xxx] *Cathair na Mart Historical Journal 2009*
- [xxxi] Forgotten Nun (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]
- [xxxii] The Nun of Kenmare (<https://www.irishcatholic.com/>) [Assessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020]