

Mother Vincent (Ellen) Whitty



Ellen Whitty (1819-1892), best known as Mother Vincent, Mercy Sister, was born on 3 March 1819 near Oilgate in County Wexford, Ireland, daughter of William Whitty and his wife Johanna, née Murphy. At 19 Ellen joined the Sisters of Mercy, a Roman Catholic Order founded in 1831 for education and social work. Influenced by the foundress Catherine McAuley who prepared her for religious profession, she was intelligent, quick and sure in judgment and within a decade was elected to the highest post in the Order as Reverend Mother of the Dublin Headhouse. She coped with the burden of social work resulting from the famine of the 1840s and organized the preparation of Sisters to go with the flood of emigrants. In 1854 Fr Robert Whitty, her brother, was vicar-general to Cardinal Wiseman at Westminster, and through him and Fr (later Cardinal) Manning, the British government invited her to send Sisters to nurse the wounded in the Crimea. After the war she established homes for neglected children and for unmarried mothers.

In 1860 Mother Vincent and five Sisters were invited by [Bishop James Quinn](#) to become the first women religious in the newly formed diocese of Queensland. She looked forward to this missionary venture, and the reluctance of her community to free her was overcome by the command of [Archbishop Cullen](#). They arrived in Australia in the *Donald Mackay* in April 1861. Mother Vincent's problems in Queensland stemmed partly from the trend towards centralized and secular state education, but more from the bishop's autocracy. She wanted to have her schools independent yet adapted to a pluralist society and so open to all creeds; but Quinn, unlike other bishops, wished her to graft the convent schools on to the state system, preserving the right to choose teachers and texts. She eventually agreed.

Mother Vincent was unable to tolerate the degree of control which the bishop sought over purely conventual matters. The tension resulting when

he demoted her to the ranks in 1865 could have wrecked her foundation or forced her to withdraw but for her profound spirituality. In 1870 on Quinn's instructions she returned to Ireland to recruit nuns and he appointed her assistant to the Queensland head of the Order, an office which she retained until her death.

Her schools flourished though some of her projects did not, notably a hospital and work with Aboriginals. At her death, twenty-six Mercy schools, mainly along the coastline to Townsville, had 222 Sisters with 7000 pupils. At Nudgee there was a Mercy Training College for teachers. Mother Vincent had commenced a secondary school (All Hallows') many years before the state entered this field. She duplicated in Brisbane the types of social work she had pioneered in Dublin, and provided a link between all forms of service in regular home visitation. She died in Brisbane on 9 March 1892 and was buried in Nudgee cemetery. Her work has stood the test of a century of change.

Source:

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/whitty-ellen-4845>