

Five Sisters

The mission in Australia is established



Artist: Hazel Cope

clockwise

Mother *Margaret* John Cahill
Sister *Julia* Lawrence Cater
Sister *Catherine* Francis de Sales O'Brien
Sister *Eliza* Francis Xavier Williams
Sister *Alicia* John Baptist De Lacy

The first women Religious to set foot on Australian soil.

Let us meet them

Margaret Cahill, Mother Mary John Cahill



Dubliner Margaret Cahill was the first to volunteer for the Australian mission: she was also the oldest at 45.

1 - 45

Dignified and from a prosperous merchant family, she had entered the congregation at 26, pronouncing her vows in 1821 and taking the name, Sr Mary John Cahill.

During her 19 years as a nun, she had already seen horrors, visiting prisoners and caring for the sick during a cholera epidemic in the early 1830s.

As Mother John Cahill, she became the first Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity in Australia and lived in difficult circumstances. In one of her letters, she writes: 'Every day seems Lent for all the Sisters'. They had very little to eat most days and some of the sisters died of malnutrition.

As the eldest of the group, she would have considered herself as the guardian of Mary Aikenhead's spirit in this new land and therefore did her best to support the sisters in every way possible.

After working at Parramatta Female Factory, Mother Mary John Cahill and two other pioneering sisters moved on to Hobart. From the moment she stepped off the *Louisa* in June 1847, she began work: at St Joseph's School, in the prison, in the hospital and the orphan school.


A dignified woman who stood erect, her piercing eyes looking out over her spectacles, she was known for her cheerfulness, melodic voice and steady flow of language. Not surprisingly given these qualities, the church was regularly packed when Mother John Cahill led religious instruction classes.

Mother John Cahill died in Hobart in 1864. She was 71.

Mother M John Cahill



1 - 45

Born in Dublin	10 May (Friday)	1793
Entered the convent	21 April (Wednesday)	1819
Commenced her Novitiate	10 October (Sunday)	1819
Made her profession	10 October (Wednesday)	1821
Began visitation and instructing prisoners in Ireland	10 October (Wednesday)	1821
Worked courageously to care for those suffering from cholera and malnutrition		1830's
First to volunteer for the Australian mission	June	1838
Left Stanhope Street Convent for Kingstown Harbour	12 August (Sunday)	1838
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia	18 August (Saturday)	1838
Arrived in Australia (45 years of age)	31 December (Monday)	1838
Left Sydney for Hobart on the 'Louisa' with two of the pioneer Sisters	14 June (Monday)	1847
First Superior of the Tasmanian Branch	February	1849
Died in Hobart, aged 71. Buried at	Wednesday 13 April at 10.30am	1864
<div><p>More about this woman of endurance and love:</p><ul style="list-style-type: none">• One of Mary Aikenhead's early novices.• Visited and instructed prisoners in Ireland.• Worked courageously to care for the sick during the cholera epidemic in Ireland in the early 1830's.• First to volunteer and 17 years professed.• Eldest of the group of sisters to come to Australia. (45)• Woman of prayer.• Named Superior for the voyage by Mary Aikenhead.• Always ready to admit faults.• A great teacher.• Musical voice and steady flow of language.• Dignified, always cheerful and forgiving.• Slight stiffness in manner.• Her eyes looking out over her spectacles.• Best missionary and a woman of integrity.• Hardworking and got on with everyone• Convict artist William Paul Dowling (b.1824 in Ireland) painted her in the 1850's.• Her portrait hangs in Domus Australia Chapel, Rome</div> <div><p>Mother M John Cahill</p></div>		

Alicia De Lacy, Sr Mary John Baptist

Alicia De Lacy entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity in 1835 specifically with the colony of New South Wales in her sights.

She wanted to help society's down-trodden; she wanted to help the women of the Female Factory in Parramatta (many of whom were neighbours in Ireland who had fallen foul of the law). To do so, she needed to endure 136 days at sea. The journey gave her plenty of time to reflect on her call.

Her early involvements saw Sr Mary Baptist organise the Catholic Orphan School at Waverley in 1838 -1940, introduce order and method to the colony's Catholic schools and visit prisoners in Darlinghurst Gaol up to three times a week.

As one of the earliest trainee nurses at the first St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin, Sr Mary Baptist proved an invaluable asset in establishing health care services in Sydney. When three of the sisters moved to Hobart, and the fourth returned to Ireland, Sr Mary Baptist remained in Sydney, beginning the formal healthcare ministry of the Sisters of Charity in Australia with the establishment of St Vincent's Hospital on Wollomooloo Heights in 1857.

An extremely hard worker, Sr Mary Baptist was also a proficient negotiator: she knew money was limited and being practical and open-minded, Sr Mary Baptist co-opted Protestant and Catholic supporters and staff, encouraging patients to practise their religion while in hospital. While this was in line with Mary Aikenhead's teachings that race, colour nor creed should interfere with hospital care, it did not go over well with some clergy. Sr Mary Baptist resigned as Rectoress over the controversy and returned to Ireland in 1859 where she continued to minister for another 20 years.



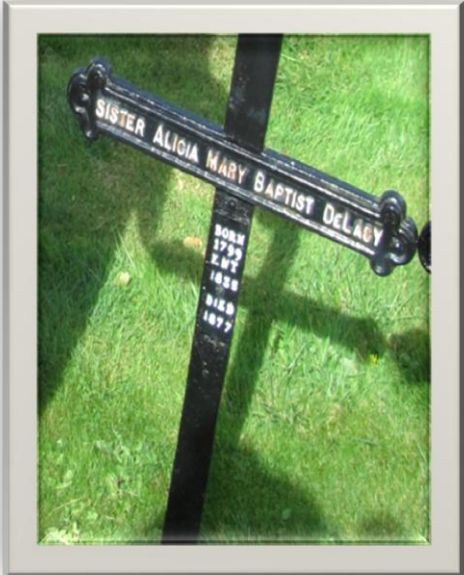
Sr Mary Baptist died in 1878, aged 79. Delacy Place in Canberra was named in honour of her contribution to health care in Australia.



Sr Mary Baptist De Lacy

2 - 39



Born in Limerick	1 July (Monday)	1799
Entered the Sisters of Charity	27 March (Friday)	1835
Received into the Novitiate	24 September (Thursday)	1835
Made her Profession and devoted her entire life to the service of others	25 September (Monday)	1837
Worked as a nurse at St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin.		
Volunteered for the Australian Mission	April - June	1838
Left Stanhope Street Convent for Kingstown Harbour	12 August (Sunday)	1838
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia	18 August (Saturday)	1838
Arrived in Australia (39 years of age)	31 December (Monday)	1838
Visited the Female Factory, Parramatta		1839
Organised the Catholic Orphan School at Waverley		1839
Introduced order and method to the Catholic schools already in the Colony		
Assisted families during the influenza epidemic		1844
Founded St Vincent's Hospital Sydney which was the first hospital opened by the Sisters in Australia.	25 August (Tuesday)	1857
Returned to Ireland on board the 'Star of the Sea'. Received a warm welcome at the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity in Dublin	6 June (Monday) 8 September (Thursday)	1859
Ministered tirelessly for a further 20 years		1859 - 1878
Died in Dublin, aged 79. Buried in the cemetery of the Congregation at Donnybrook, Dublin.	12 December (Thursday)	1878
<p>More about this woman of healing and courage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Great capacity to attract friends and support.• Prayerful and reflective.• Proficient organiser, practical and open-minded.• Extremely hard worker.• Intolerant at times.• A caring and compassionate nurse.• Skilled manager and negotiator of finance – respected.• Well liked, affirming, all embracing.• Saw the big picture – had a vision.• Rolled up her sleeves to lend a hand where needed.• Much of the knowledge about the work of the early Sisters in the colony is gleaned from her writings.		<div></div> <p>Sr M Baptist De Lacy is buried in the Sisters cemetery at Donnybrook, Dublin.</p>

Eliza Williams

Sister Francis Xavier



3 - 38

Diminutive unassuming Sister Mary Xavier Williams was still a novice when she headed down-under in 1838: she'd only entered the Sisters of Charity two years earlier following her mother's death.

On 9 April 1839, Sr Mary Xavier Williams became the first woman professed on Australian soil. The ceremony took place at St Patrick's Church in Parramatta. This was very special occasions, not only for the Sisters, but for the colony's burgeoning Catholic community, inspiring other young women to join the Order.

Sr Xavier believed that being a Sister of Charity brought with it the responsibility of caring for, and helping, others. She once said her work was to "bring hope" to people's lives: "these people need some inspiration and that is why we have come".



This tenacious little nun was always ready to help everyone she met. She ministered to the outcast convicts, visited the poor, the sick or grieving in their homes, taught children and adults, and proved a compassionate and loving mother-figure to the orphaned.

Sr Xavier joined Mother John Cahill and Sr de Sales O'Brien in furthering the Congregation's work in Van Diemen's Land. They visited the female penitentiary, an institution of far more misery than the Female Factory in Parramatta; they visited schools, and also the sick and poor in their homes and hospitals. Bishop Willson said the three pioneer Sisters in Tasmania did as much work as 15 sisters in Ireland.

Sr Xavier became Tasmania's first religious principal at St Joseph's Girls' School, in Macquarie Street and established St Joseph's orphanage in 1879, at the age of 79.

About 300 destitute women and children feasted as part of her golden jubilee celebrations in 1889. A year later, Sr Xavier retired, having seen the Tasmanian and Sydney Congregations amalgamate. She passed away in 1892 and is buried in the Cornelian Bay cemetery, Hobart.

Mother Francis Xavier Williams

3 - 38

referred to as 'the little saint' in Tasmania



Born in Kilkenny, Ireland.	12 July (Saturday)	1800
Commenced her Novitiate.	Thursday 8 (December)	1836
Volunteered to come to Australia.	June	1838
Left Stanhope Street Convent for Kingstown Harbour.	12 August (Sunday)	1838
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August (Saturday)	1838
Arrived at Sydney, Australia. (38 years old) Seasick all the way	31 December (Monday)	1838
First woman to be professed on Australian soil. This took place at St Patrick's Church, Parramatta.	9 April (Tuesday)	1839
A member of the group of three to <u>sail across Bass Strait</u> on the 'Louisa' to pioneer Convent Life and Ministry in Hobart.	14 June (Monday)	1847
Loyalty to the Congregation's Constitutions was demonstrated.	June	1847
The factory women made her an appliqué from factory cloth to celebrate communion at the factory.		
Is named in records as the <u>first Religious Principal</u> of a Tasmania school – St Joseph's Girls' School, in Macquarie Street.		
Established St Joseph's Orphanage, Hobart. (aged 79!)		1879
Celebrated her Golden Jubilee of Religious Profession. The FIRST in Australia.	April	1889
The amalgamation with the Sisters of Charity in Sydney was approved. Eliza initiated this move.		1890
Died in Hobart. (91 years and 9 months old)	8 April (Friday)	1892
Buried in the vault at Cornelian Bay cemetery, Hobart	8 April (Friday)	1892

More about this woman of perseverance and love

- Her father and mother eloped – mixed marriage.
- Father was in the army.
- Eliza had a twin brother, named William.
- Grew up caring for her mother and 4 brothers and sister.
- Teacher and taught in a school owned by her aunts.
- Entered the convent after her mother died.
- Loyal and affectionate. Got on with everyone.
- Her sister, Maria, entered the Sisters of Charity.
- Her influence and instruction brought about positive changes for the female population. Compassionate and loving mother-figure.
- Worked tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of the poor
- Sound commonsense and wisdom.
- Wrote many business letters while in Tasmania.



Mother M Xavier Williams

Catherine Henrietta O'Brien,

Sister Francis de Sales



4 - 29

Catherine was born into a well-to-do family on 2 June 1809 in Cork, Ireland.

She was charming and well bred, and had been educated at the Sacred Heart Convent in France. She had a vast network of relations in Ireland and a cousin, Roger Therry, prominent in Catholic affairs in Australia.

As a young woman she suffered tragedy. Before she entered the convent, her father, Cornelius, and four of her sisters had died. Her mother, a little after her husband's death, sustained head injuries in a fall from her carriage which impaired her reason and prevented her from managing her affairs. The two younger daughters then became wards of the chancery and when Catherine, aged eighteen, returned from boarding school in France, she entered the Sisters of Charity. On hearing this guardian promptly removed her as he thought she was too young. Her desire to stand with the poor and suffering did not waiver and she returned three years later, taking vows in 1834.

Sr. Mary Francis de Sales O'Brien (4 years professed) volunteered to go to Australia to make a difference in people's lives. Apprehensive about what lay ahead, she was well prepared for the challenge: she was one of three sisters sent to Paris to study hospital administration ahead of St Vincent's Hospital's opening in Dublin. She was also recognised for her teaching skills and the English Government agreed to pay a stipend for her to teach in the NSW Colony.



After working in Parramatta, she came under pressure to adopt Benedictine ways, but with the support of Mother John Cahill and Sr Mary Xavier Williams, she chose instead to relocate to Hobart in 1847 to continue working within the Sisters of Charity Constitutions and to continue helping the downtrodden women in the gaols.

Mother de Sales O'Brien died in Hobart in 1871 after a long and painful illness.

Sister Francis de Sales O'Brien

4 - 29



Born in Cork	2 June (Friday)	1809
Commenced her Novitiate	11 March	1831
Made her profession	29 August (Friday)	1834
Volunteered to come to Australia (29 years of age)	June	1838
Left Stanhope Street Convent for Kingstown Harbour	12 August (Sunday)	1838
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia.	18 August (Saturday)	1838
Made superior in place of Cahill on the voyage.		1838
Arrived in Australia. (29 years of age)	31 December (Monday)	1838
Head superior of the Parramatta community.		
Set sail from Sydney for Hobart on the 'Louisa' with two of the pioneer Sisters.	14 June (Wednesday)	1847
Made Mistress of Novices and Assistant to M John Cahill.	February	1849
Died at 11.30pm in the convent in Hobart Town, aged 63 and the 38 th of her religious profession	6 November (Monday)	1871

More about this woman of loyalty and compassion:

- Was the mistress of a vast estate, living at Castle Kilcor.
- Conscious of her own importance as heiress.
- A very beautiful woman and refined.
- Charming ways of someone educated in France.
- Sent to Paris to study hospital administration
- Delicate and sensitive.
- Made superior in place of Cahill on the voyage.
- Not able to withstand pressure.
- Difficult for Catherine to accept the authority of Cahill, the daughter of a tradesman.
- Could be impulsive at times.
- Skilled and dedicated teacher.
- Many noble qualities and heroic virtues which distinguished her life and endeared her to everyone.



Sister Francis de Sales O'Brien

Julia Matilda Cater,

Sr Mary Lawrence

(known as St Mary Magdalen Chantal in Australia)



5 - 27

Julia was born on Friday 28 June 1811 in England into an upper class family with strong connections with the Catholic community.

She entered the Congregation on Saturday 24 August 1830 and was received into the Novitiate a few months later. As a novice she received the habit and white veil, together with a new name, Sister Mary Lawrence Cater. On Wednesday 23 January 1833 she pronounced her vows and devoted her entire life to the service of others.

Sr M Lawrence Cater (*known as Sr M Magdalen Chantal in Australia*) was 27 years of age when she came to Australia. She was the youngest and the only Englishwoman amongst the pioneer group.

She was born into an upper class family with strong connections with the Catholic community and clergy. She was also recognised for her teaching skills and the English Government agreed to pay for their teaching services to the Colony. Dr Ullathorne acknowledged her wit and solid education.

Cater, like Cahill and O'Brien, wrote home in the early years to Ireland to try to reclaim her dowry to alleviate the financial deprivation the Sisters suffered in Australia. The Sisters found it both embarrassing and distressing to deprive the mission in Australia of the small aid it received from overseas funding by accepting funds from the Church..



As well as visiting the Female Factory, Cater was given the position of head of the Catholic Orphan School at Parramatta, and she also instructed the novices for a short time. But trials of colonial life as well as weakening health encouraged an ever growing desire to abandon the mission.

She returned to Ireland in 1846, but eventually left the Irish Congregation, later joining the Benedictine Oblates. She finally left religious life and took the position of governess in a French family.

Sister Mary Lawrence Cater

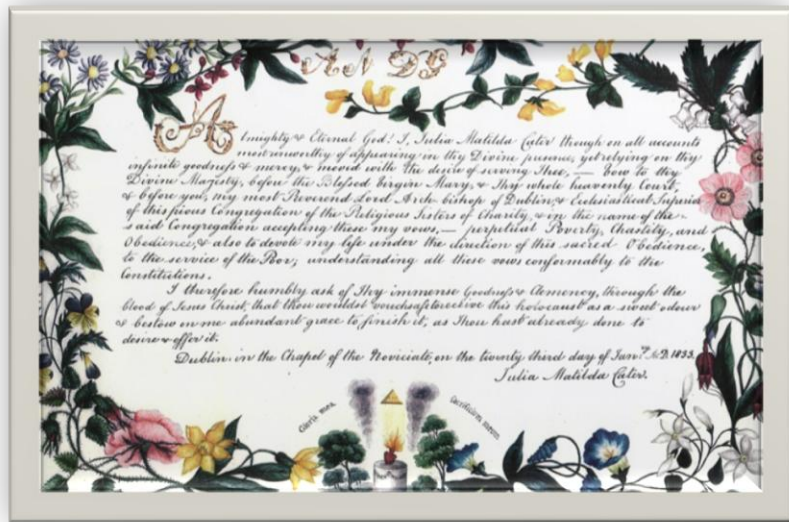


5 - 27

Born in England	26 November (Tuesday)	1811
Entered the Congregation	24 August (Saturday)	1830
Commenced her Novitiate	October	1830
Made her profession	23 January (Wednesday)	1833
Began visitation of the sick poor immediately		
Volunteered for the Australian Mission	June	1838
The only Englishwoman amongst the pioneer group.		
Left Stanhope Street Convent for Kingstown Harbour	12 August (Sunday)	1838
Left Port of Gravesend bound for Sydney, Australia	18 August (Saturday)	1838
Arrived in Australia (27 years of age)	31 December (Monday)	1838
Changed her name to <i>St Mary Magdalen Chantal</i>		
Visited the Female Factory, Parramatta		1839
Head of the Catholic Orphan School at Parramatta – admired for her organisation skills and success		
Assisted families during the influenza epidemic		1844
Returned to Ireland		1846
Joined the Benedictine Oblates for a short time.		
Left Religious life and took a position of governess in a French family.		
Died in		

More about this woman of suffering and change:

- State English lady.
- Youngest of the five pioneer Sisters.
- Witty but not always wise.
- Solid education.
- Restless from the beginning.
- Artistic talents.
- Badly affected by mosquitoes.
- Commended by Polding for ‘admirably organising’ the Catholic Orphan School, Parramatta.
- Discerning and prayerful.



The signed vows of
Julia Matilda Cater dated 23/01/1833

Three pioneer Sisters journey to Hobart



Anchored at the wharf of Sydney Harbour and prepared for sailing to Hobart was the small two square-rigged masts of 181 tons the 'Louisa'.

At 7am on Monday 14 June 1847 the cabin passengers went on board;

Mrs Cahill, Mrs Williams, Mrs. O'Brien

Miss R Strenney, Ensign Moffatt 96th Regiment

The Sisters were surprised to find that Judge Therry and Mrs Therry and Mr and Mrs Plunkett were already there with many comforts for their voyage.

The loaded cargo comprised rum, coal tar, Chinese matting, boxes of toys, chinaware, a case of rhubarb, bullock hides, white sugar, black pepper and tobacco.

They remained through-out the entire day waiting for a breeze to waft them on their way, but none came. At 11am on Tuesday 15 June, the wind swept them southward at great speed and the normal ten day rough passage was made in five.

On Saturday evening, 19 June they passed the lighthouse in the Derwent River estuary and thought they would be in Hobart for Sunday morning Mass. Alas, when they awoke they discovered that they had not moved during the night!

When with 'Louisa' was lying at anchor and unable to land, Dr William Hall, the Vicar General secured a small boat and was taken out to meet the Sisters on the freezing Sunday morning, 20 June 1847.

He gave them a most cordial welcome and they gladly accepted his invitation to accompany him back to the town in the small boat.

By this time word of the arrival of the religious Sisters of Charity had spread amongst the population. When the sea voyagers stepped ashore a large crowd assembled as the Sisters were taken up Macquarie Street to St Joseph's Church for Mass which had been prepared by Bishop Robert Willson for this memorial and historic occasion.

The work of the Sisters of Charity in Tasmania had begun.