



To Recapture the Dream

The Spiritual journey and heritage of Mary Potter

Founder of the Little Company of Mary

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Section Three: Mission and Ministry

Community and Prayer -The basis for Mission

When Mary Potter began her small institute, the vision that she held within her heart was of a "community of people, forming one united body, in which the members would unite the active to the contemplative life, and hence have various offices to perform" (Conf. "M" p.1)

This united body, through its solidarity and commitment to the call it had received, would participate in the mission of the Church, of which it was a part. It would be a means of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, and the salvation he had brought to the world through his Passion and death. How the community would do this- the manner of its evangelisation - had been determined by the working words which had impressed themselves on the heart and soul of the founder. The members of the Little Company would assist in the mission of the Church by leading people to understand the wonder of the Incarnation and by leading them into the Path of Mary:

Oh most tender brother, Jesus....infuse into my memory what is needful for thy Mother's work. Guard my mind from useless, hurtful thoughts. Live in my heart and soul. I will love for thee. I will take to my heart those whom you send to me - their wants, I lay before thee: and my own children, do you guard them in all wanderings. Keep them in thy name sweet Jesus, who bear the name of Mary...who are covered by her mantle, _who are bound to spread knowledge, and make thee known, through her. May they be earnest in gathering to her heart, the wanderers of earth, leading them in her path.(O.N. 1A, p.37)

If the community was called to work for the sake of the kingdom, it was first necessary that they had been formed within the path they were called to, so that the community was itself united in its spirit and spirituality. Mission could not be accomplished if the members were divided amongst themselves - if division or disunity marred the witness that was proper to the community. Hence, it was important that the members gained strength and support for mission, by experiencing the Kingdom within the group. It was the community which would bear witness to the truth of the message they preached:

It was the community, which, by its internal life of loving unity, would demonstrate the fact that the Kingdom had indeed come, and was living in the world. What that meant, was that the community was the first place that the Word was to be preached and received - or not received, as the case may be.

We are all dear Sisters, bound together to accomplish a certain work we must all therefore have that work at heart. We must all be anxious to further it. We should all be very sorry if we thought we retarded it in any way. All of us therefore, must put our shoulder to the wheel to assist and further what we are banded together to perform. (M.C. No.9., p. 98)

Unity of purpose and desire was essential, if the mission of the Little Company was to be a sign of the of the reign of God in the world. The members were not a secular institute. They were religious, bound by poverty, chastity and obedience. The witness they were called to give to the world was not through a secular life style, but through a 'religious' life:

A number of kind hearted women, living together, doing acts of charity with a very good will, anxious to please, and ever willing to do something kind, is indeed a good work, and such a sisterhood would deserve the esteem of men, but it would not be esteemed by God, if it had been founded by Him to be a religious order - that is, a body of people bound. A body of people who have given up their own will, their own way, their own ideas, to live according to the will of another. (Conferences "I" No. 27, p.93f)

The binding of the religious was the public acceptance of vows of chastity poverty and obedience The implication of the vows for the life of the member of the institute, was that it was through the practice of poverty, chastity, and obedience, that holiness would be achieved. There was no avoiding the message of those vows: They were the sign of the Cross, freely chosen. If the member of the Little Company lived her vows in their spirit and truth, then her life would be an oblation for the good of all, in the same manner as Christ's life had been just such an oblation. The challenge was to live life as one who is in tune with the will of God. It was the act of one who hoped for, believed in, and was prepared to work towards the coming of the fullness of Christ in her own heart and in the heart of the world.

The task of living such a life of abnegation is difficult, and supports are needed. For Mary Potter, one of the human supports that would give courage and hope to the individual journey into God, lay at the heart of the community. The community was the place of nurturance of that hope, even as it was the witness to it. The community was to represent on earth the love life of the Trinity:

In heaven above, from all eternity, there were three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father - love, the Son - love, the Spirit - love. Their life? An uninterrupted, unceasing, everlasting, blissful love and complacency in their life of infinite love.....Then, this infinite ocean of love seems to have overflowed, and creation to have resulted....Then let us imitate, let us follow the example of heaven. Let us do on earth as they do in heaven. Let us lead lives of love at home....(M.C. C.8, p.)

Living such a life of internal unity, the community would be the source and wellspring for all actions. It would be a highly visible expression of the reality of God. Living together, bound by a shared vision, spirituality, and desire of the heart for holiness and wholeness, each member would enable the community to grow and blossom into its own identity. Through the actions of individuals, the community would become the 'home' that was Mary's Heart. Uniting the individual acts into one unity, the community would develop a life of its own, which would become the nurturing and sustaining force for the members.

If all in the community lived united in charity and faith, then the supports that the human heart needed would be brought into existence. The community would become what it was meant to be:

Our Community should be to us as a Mother: Our very life. It gives to us a new life. It gives to us the particular being we have for all eternity: Therefore is our community our Mother. (Conference "A", No. 25, p. 44)

As a Mother, the community - the congregation, was the place of sanctification and grace for the members it held to itself. It was both the heart of all the actions and ministries performed, even as it to be the hearth that welcomed and gave warmth to others who needed its love and tenderness. The internal life of unity within the community would radiate outwards to the world, and at the same time, draw others to it. The dynamic of community was both active and contemplative. The contemplative heart would draw to itself those who were called to share in the life of the Spirit those who needed the shadow of its wings those who needed a mothering, to renew their strength or find stability in their lives. The outreaching arms, the apostolic or ministerial dimension, would also flow from this centre , and those who ministered to their brothers and sisters in the world, would find their strength, support and security from it:

Let us earnestly invoke the God of love to bestow upon us the Holy Spirit of love, that love may reign in our hearts that within Mary's homes, there may be ever a happy halo of love that possessing it ourselves, we may pour from our abundance upon others, and thus we may imitate the God of love. (M.C. 8., p. 95)

If love was the hallmark of the community, it had to come from a spiritual centering. The whole concept of community was based upon the common desire for holiness and therefore, wholeness. If the group was to grow into its fullness of life, each individual member had to take responsibility for the life of the whole, by her commitment to developing both the heart and the hearth.

This development was based in the life of prayer and oblation that the members had chosen. There was no middle way - only the hard road of the Cross, the harsh reality of obedience and poverty. Only through an intense prayer life - both personal and communal - could the Kingdom become a reality within the individual or within the group. Prayer was at the heart of all that was to be said and done, because prayer was the means of union with God, the motivation and the support of all actions: The individual had to strive for a spirit of prayer in order that the community may have life. That required being open to the Spirit of God who is the only inspiration for prayer:

Father Faber tells us that anyone who says he cannot pray after dinner, has no spirit of prayer within him. The same may be said regarding some who say they cannot pray in bed. They too have so spirit of prayer in them. A true spirit of prayer comes from the Spirit of God dwelling in them, dwelling in the soul. God's spirit is not affected by time and place. We cannot pray but by the spirit of God, and he who has God's spirit can pray at all times and in all places. It is the evil of evils, a want of a true spirit of prayer. (Unpublished conference on Prayer.)

To gain a spirit of prayer was of primary importance for the member of the Little Company, because the mission and ministry to which she had been called, was dependent upon it. A life of prayer that replicated the constant contemplation of the Heart of Mary was at the centre of life. She who had 'pondered all things in her heart' was the model for the members of the Little Company.

Mary Potter knew well that prayer was no easy task. The human hunger for God is subjected to all kinds of temptations and weariness, and the human heart is fickle if love does not seem returned by love. She constantly exhorted her followers to persevere. If God is silent - let us wait in the silence. If he speaks, then let us praise him, but not wait around waiting for the echoes. There was a need to learn of prayer from Mary, the Mother of Jesus:

You complain of dryness in prayer, of an apparent impossibility of applying your mind. Still, persevere, but do not persevere in pushing yourself before God. Quietly sink down into your own nothingness and in the place of your own selfish dispositions, place our Lady's unselfishness before our Lord. He may not allow you sensible devotion for fear you should rest in it and then lose the essence of the devotion you are consecrated to, that devotion that teaches you to put in the place of your spirit, our Lady's beautiful spirit, to remember that, as her own, you are bound to live by her, for her, in her, that you, in some part, are to take her place on this earth, striving to beautify this world by showing to God some upon it who are living the beautiful life led by our Lady upon it, and thus delight the eyes of God. (ibid)

Communion with God in prayer was the life work of the member of the institute. It was the place of growth and the place where the soul may come to understand the truth of its very being. It was the place where "I" realises itself as created and bows down in the purest exhalation of "tThou" - the adoration and praise of a creature bound in love to the Creator. For Mary Potter, the spirituality of the Path of Mary, with its emphasis on developing within the soul the grace of the pure abandonment of Mary, would lead the individual to holiness:

If you come before God full of your own dispositions, even though they be good and holy, you do not give God the glory you would if you come with our Lady's dispositions, and if you are full of your own dispositions, feelings, and inclinations, you hinder God's Holy Spirit forming you at will. You might grow into some certain character - have some certain spirituality formed within you, some distinct spirit good in itself, but - our Lady's little Company is to have no other character but hers no spirituality but the spirit she had, which was in our Lord himself. This has to be attained by careful labour, by crushing self, by subduing self, by seeking no self satisfaction in prayer and works. (Ibid)

To pray with the heart of Mary - to abandon desire in prayer, or even to abandon the desire to be holy as the "I" might itself perceive holiness to be, would enable the Spirit to form the member of the Little Company in full. The individual would become the blank slate on which the word of God could be written. It would be uncluttered and constantly ready for the action of God. As Mary had been:

We have simply and solely to strive to glorify God by remaining on earth, by renewing the life led on it by our dear Mother. By doing what we know she would do if now on earth. It is repeating the same thing over and over again - but it is necessary. It is a hard lesson to learn - the lesson of fighting with our own sins and temptations. We know we must do that we know we must repress our evil inclinations. Ah! this is hard indeed, but to repress and mortify our good inclinations is indeed harder. For instance, when about to perform an action from a naturally good desire, a charitable motive, we check ourselves and do the action from a desire to do what our Lady would do, and what she would have us to do, at least, we bring that motive uppermost. (ibid)

To have no will but the will of God: To have no desire but the desire to be what one has been called to be! This epitomised the radical life of the member of the Little Company: She was to be always poised to act according to the wish of God rather than the wish of self. It was to live on a cutting edge - constantly balanced, waiting, ready to discern the moment of God's action, and to act accordingly. It was a radical movement away from self to the concept of being totally 'taken over' by Love, and always willing to do what that Love willed. That required discipline and constant awareness and practice of the Presence of God, combined with a readiness to leave all things. It was, in fact, the reality of living in the Spirit. It was an experience that could only be attained by effort, by a constant putting aside of self. To this end, Mary Potter laid some ground rules:

To return to the subject of prayer: attend more with our Lady. Receive Holy Communion in union with her make your visits to the Blessed Sacrament in union with her have Jesus ever before your eyes, in your heart, in union with his holy Mother. Constantly pray to be in union with Mary. Live in an atmosphere of prayer. The habit may at first be difficult, but the reward for your trouble will be great. Now, commence at this very moment. Whatever you are engaged in, make a distinct intention to do it in and for Mary, then, when next you go to prayer, it will come easier for you to renew your intention of being in union with our Lady, but, however, make a distinct offering, and do not think this is a light matter, this formal act. It is a very important thing. It is a fresh act of love of God, of love of our Lady, and we shall know only in the next world, the value of any act of love of God. (Ibid.)

What Mary Potter realised from her own life and growth into God, was the necessity of the action of the will. If the member of the institute, and the institute itself, was to reflect the holiness to which it had been called, then a constant effort of Will was required. The falls did not matter then, the important thing was the attitude of heart and mind, which, together with the will, would open the soul to receive the powerful act of God, transforming, liberating and drawing the soul into intimacy and loving union. The habits acquired from direct and stern discipline, would become interiorized, become part of the life of the soul. Using the example of the musician, Mary Potter wrote:

The musician we see so easily fingering his instrument and producing such beautiful harmony, so easily, with so

little trouble to himself, did not find the art easy to acquire. He learnt to play note by note, but with practise he gradually acquired proficiency. Thus we must acquire our gifts we must practise note by note we must study and then gradually will come the habit of virtue, when we shall perform it easily, almost unconsciously to ourselves, even in this grand gift of prayer - Mary like prayer is acquired. (Ibid)

If the habit and the spirit of prayer is acquired in the soul, there follows a natural benefit. The transformation of the individual who lives the life of the Spirit, leads to a flexibility and a charity that enhances the life of the community. The personal life of prayer of the members is the key to the witness of the community. If all are striving to achieve harmony of mind and heart and will to the Will of God, then the community is blessed - the individuals reflect to one another the common desire of the human heart for holiness and wholeness the common desire to love and be loved. Thus charity becomes the norm. That love, which is the pre-eminent gift of the Spirit, becomes the lived reality of community. If actions within community are performed in the same spirit as they are in prayer - if the same habits are cultivated - habits of listening for the voice of God rather than the inner voice of self, then loving unity will prevail. Moreover, a true spirit of prayer will lead to contrition of heart, a real understanding of our littleness before the greatness of God. Thus, simplicity will grow alongside humility and contrition, which will enable the individual to receive the great gift of Mercy, and then become an agent of Mercy to the other:

I am the Vine, you are the branches, spoke our dear Lord. The sap of the Vine spreads runs through the branches, and our dear Lord's blood runs through his members, uniting them together, making them have one interest, one life, one love, Himself. Yes, this should be, dear sisters, but is it? Do we love one another as our dear Lord would have us? Still more, do we love one another some little as Jesus loves us? Ah, the happy soul that loves, that pours itself out upon others, that truly feels that it is loving Jesus in loving others. Indeed, heaven is begun on earth in the soul of the one who truly loves the souls of others: With the selfsame love with which we love our Divine Lord, must we love each other. The apostle tells us so. The first commandment is that we love God with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with our whole strength, with our whole mind - and the second is like to it - "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Love one another" speaks Jesus, "as I have loved you". (Unpublished Conference on the Precious Blood)

The reality of such a love between the members of the community would bind them into a unity which would enable them to work together in mission. The realisation of the wonder of God living in the heart of each individual, would lift the life of the Little Company into being a living witness of the truth of the kingdom. It would bring with it an openness to difference of talent and skill an understanding of the variety of gifts, and a willingness to share and cooperate in ministry. It would build unity of heart and unity of purpose, strengthening the faint-hearted, encouraging the strong. It would be the means of bringing the individual into her own wonder, and be the point of attraction for many. The Little Company would hold each other dear, as being "Chalices of the Precious Blood" (ibid), who together would offer themselves to the Father that others may have life. The fruit of such an awareness would be: ...(a) love for one another, love for all around, love breathed into us by the Spirit of Love, the Holy Ghost, who ever works in the world by means of the Precious Blood (ibid).

If unity was brought about by the willing desire of each member of the Institute to offer herself to be pruned, according the

will of the Father of all Mercies, it was equally true that the mission of the Community to be one in heart, mind and will, would be destroyed by the sins that lay in the hearts of the members.

Mary Potter knew well that the root of disunity was sin, and that evil would make its attacks on any person or group which sought to live united with God. If the mission of the group was to be accomplished, there had to be a unity of purpose which was supportive and regenerative:

If a sister is tempted and the devil overcomes her, all in the community loses by her loss...We are now united, - we must ever be so. A house divided against itself cannot stand._ We must cling to one another, we must look for help to one another. We must expect and receive such help. Those who row together in a boat all pull one way. they must do so if they would get on. So with us. We must pull together, or we shall be upset, and I pray that any house, where charity does not reign may be broken up, that it may be cut off from our Lady's Little Company. May it be disconnected from its root, and cast off like a branch of a vine separated from its parent stem. May it wither and cease to exist in God's garden, the Church! (M.C. C.8. p.95)

If the community lived the grace it had been given, then it would have power to act within the world in which it had been planted. Community existed not only for the benefit of the members, but for the Church itself. Mary Potter was convinced of the fact that the Little Company had been formed by the Word of God. It was his design. Those who had been called to it, were called to be apostles. They had been touched by God through the vocation issued to them, and like the disciples of Jesus, were bound together by that contact. The specific call to bear fruit that would remain - the specific call to Mission in the name of the Church, and under its auspices, had bound them to preach the good news of Jesus by word and deed.

Like the members of the early Church, their life in community was a sign of the love of God: The intimate life of the community, its gathering together for worship, sororal charity, eucharist, and loving union, would only have meaning if it became witness to the truth of Jesus living within each of the members. It would only have relevance, if it challenged those who saw it and drew from them, admiration and conversion, through its own specific preaching and teaching of the good news of Christ dead and risen for us all.

Let Mary's homes make up to God. Let them be sanctuaries of love, souls bound together, Mother and children true to one another, true to their vocation, therefore true to God. Faithful, loving the word "fidelity". Let it be engraven on the walls. Let it be engraven on the hearts of whom God has joined together to represent to him his human life, as he intended it (to be). Christ came to restore all things. Let us help to that restoration - happy to be made use of by our God. (O.N. Vol. 5., P. 52)

If the Little Company was to bear communal witness to the "hope that is in us" - if it was to be a channel of grace for all, the members had to be unafraid of sharing the gifts of grace and goodness they had been given. They had been called to preach and teach the good news out of hearts that had themselves known conversion and loving Mercy. It is our Mission to tell the tale of Jesus' pity to save souls....Rise up in power and preach the wonders of the pity of the Sacred Heart.....draw to this source of strength, the weak, the sinful. It is our work, and how needful. Souls seem shipwrecking (sic) before our

eyes...they are souls for whom Jesus shed the last drops of his blood, the images of our God upon whose souls he imprinted his own likeness - and they perish! Pleadingly Jesus (appealed) to all to love one another, but his own cherished ones should not need to be reminded of that. (Conferences "J", P.87)

Only a heart that has been touched by Mercy Incarnate can truly speak the words of life to others. Only a group that was committed to its own inner life as the source of its being and mission, could take upon itself the task of being Gospel in the world. Yet this was the task for the Little Company - its first task above all others: To evangelize - to give witness to the kingdom by leading people to Jesus through Mary. This was the singular call. The community had been gathered together to speak the good news in its own language (cf. Acts 2:11), so that others might respond and come to new life in Christ by entering the path of Mary. It would not be an easy path to follow, nor an easy path to preach, for the very nature of the spirituality was simplicity, and the folly of the Cross. But, it was the mission that had been established, and if the Little Company was to be true to its origins in God, then it had to be accomplished.

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The first principle of evangelization for Mary Potter lay in the fact that "God so loved the World that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). From the first moments of her being drawn to experience the immensity of that love, Mary Potter had identified the essence of Mission as an urgent and unstoppable demand to enable others to enter into the experience of God - to find themselves as redeemed, made holy, and extraordinarily beautiful. Having come to understand her own origins in the mystery of the Godhead 'before the world was' (Jer. 1:5), she saw all humanity in that same light. All people had been, 'before the world was', in the heart and mind of God. The sadness, the truth and pity was that they did not know it. Evil sought to cloud the vision of the heart, and the human being - so beautiful, so loved by the Creator, was left floundering in the darkness of inadequacy, fear, doubt and despair. The message Jesus had come to bring was not being shouted loudly enough from the roof tops. The truth about Calvary - the moment of redemption and love - needed explication. God's own compassion for his people had sent the Son. The Son's compassion for his people had led him into death, and the final outpouring of mercy and love, was through the wonder of a God who would die for beings he himself had created! The absurdity, the magnificence of such a love, had to be shared. The same compassion that had first urged God, had to be welcomed by the ones who sought to follow him:

Show thyself dear Lord, as thou art, and then will thy spouses grow into similarity in their degree with thee, love all with thee, suffer for all, bear with all, be raised above the world, keep to their high state as consecrated ones, called by thee to live a pure life, devoid of self, devoid of the things of sense.....
What would any creature on earth desire, if they knew how their creator desired them? What heart could wish greater love, if it realised but a little of thy love my Jesus? Who would feel lonely, knowing you are near. Who would want someone to lean on? (O.N. 1A, p. 20)

In her own pain at the sight of the suffering of those who did not know the wonders that awaited them, Mary Potter wrote of the suffering of heart and the love that should be the characteristic of the disciple. On the one hand, there is the joy of personal union: on the other, the call to share it: I could rejoice with wondrous joy, I could remain in peace, untroubled, entirely content, overflowing with happiness - but, O God! My God! My People! my poor people! In pain I cry out to

thee: Mercy my God, Mercy! It is thy prerogative. I do not doubt thy Mercy. My pain is with these poor people... these souls in sin, in grievous trials, temptations, miseries untold, hearts bleeding, pierced broken hearted at their own miserable failures - fearful for the future, despairing at the past - (will these doubt your mercy?) My God! Move men's minds. (O.N. 4, No. 66 p. 40).

If souls were to be saved, there had to be a consciousness that the world did not exist for the self alone - each member of the human family was bound together by the fact of their creation in God. . For the Little Company, there was the need to know the world as family. There was need to know the role of being 'mother' to that family. There was a need to be totally immersed in the world, whilst not being distorted by its values:

Oh how can we be so supine to what goes on in the world. It would be so selfish if we love God's Church. Whatever may affect it affects us. All that affects the Church, God's beautiful work on earth, now given to our Lady. See our Lady with the Church in her hands, pressed to her heart, and then love it with some of her love, and we would then be anxious to know all that is for its good. We watch the nations and all that is going on in various countries, whether they are well disposed or not....How could a soul be aiming at perfection...it is not holiness to be wrapt up in oneself - watch the history of the world, as do the angels (O.N. Vol. 4., No 57, P.26)

To bring people to an awareness of their glory in being children of the Father, through the saving and sanctifying presence of Christ, Mary Potter had been given the grace and the task of evangelizing in a specific manner. The words 'honour the heart of my Mother' had been engraved upon her heart. It was for the members to honour that heart, by living its virtues, but why? Because Mary Potter had come to understand that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Mother of all mankind, not only had a role to play in the plan of salvation she was also the sign of the intimate union the human person could and would have with the Son and the Father, through the power of the Spirit. The mother of the Lord was not to be venerated simply for her motherhood of the Christ but because, as Jesus himself had explained, she had heard the word of the Father and had acted upon it (Matt.12, 46-50), and she had done this as a human being like ourselves! For Mary Potter, the Mother of the Lord was the example of how a human being could respond to God, could reflect the glory of God within her own person, if they were freed to do so. That freedom, however, would only come from union of heart and mind and will with the will of God. This in turn meant that the individual had to understand clearly her place in God - her relationship to him through creation - and her place in the wonder of the Incarnation. The Mother of Jesus reflected both these elements in her life.

In a certain sense, the person of the Mother of the Lord reflected the humanity of those who truly lived the fullness of Baptism: No other human being had lived so completely for the Father as had Mary. No other person had been prepared to permit the shadow of the Holy Spirit to encompass him or her, to the degree that she had. Mary was thus an example and a guide to living the fullness of the God-life in the world:

If the life of Mary could be born in the soul of an individual, then the life of Christ would also be born, for who could separate the life of the Mother from the Son? More than that, however, Mary was given the responsibility by her Son to bring his people, her children of the Passion, into their fullness of life: It follows, if none on earth ever has or ever could give God the joy thou gavest Him, so, if souls become like thee, in some small, even very slight reflection of thee, these can promote God's

glory more than by anything else, for to be like thee sweet mother, at all, how we should strive to save souls. (O.N. No. 19, P.41)

To learn of Mary was to learn of one's own dignity and love-ability. But if such a way of coming to know, love and understand Christ was to be achieved, then a process to enable that understanding and response had to be made available. There was an education that was necessary for those of the community who were called to take a direct part in this mission of the Little Company:

I want you in each house, to put by a little time for sisters who are capable of study, to read, so as to be able to do good, and to know how to give an answer to "the hope that is in us", as we are told by the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? To be able to put in a pleasant attractive manner, what we ourselves believe.....By laying down what you believe simply and almost in the manner that the one you are speaking to likewise believes, it will carry them with you - whereas, if you oppose what they believe, their wills will rise up that powerful agent that does all our good or bad.....Dear Sisters, it is a great need, and we ought to pray to God to send us souls to join, with humility and power of speech, to give the answer to the hope that is in us:...(Some priests) have the unreasonable thought in sending us subjects, (that) they need not be educated! (Conf. "A", No.43, p.82)

This need to have sisters 'educated' in order to spread the word of God through all levels of society, was a thought that Mary Potter sought to bring home to the members of the institute. If the charge given to the Little Company was to be effective, then needs had to be met. And they had to be met - in terms of the vows the sisters themselves undertook - "to the greatest perfection that (they) could attain". This was an obligation on all the works that the Sisters would undertake, whether that be nursing, teaching, caring for the poor, helping priests. There was to be no haphazard ministry. All was to be performed with the greatest charity, the greatest skill, the greatest capacity that each member could muster. The spreading of the word of God demanded that. Evangelization through the direction of souls was part of the Mission to bring to life the Christ who lived in the heart of each of his people. It was to bring to light the talents and the gifts planted in the soul of the individual that the world may become one in Christ:

It is not that we are supposed to do a great deal ourselves, beyond what our rule prescribes, but we who mix so much with the world, should influence and encourage others to use their talents and energies for God's service, instead of frittering them away on what does not tend to the Glory of God, the sanctification or salvation of their souls or those of others. (Conferences "K" No. 22., p.92).

To make one's home available, to bestir the self to shout the good news of salvation from the roof top, can be challenge and is certainly commitment, but Mary Potter was certain that it was the duty of the Little Company to enter wholeheartedly into the work of the Kingdom - the preaching of the good news of Jesus. It was fundamental to the call of being a religious: What had been given to her, and through her, to those who would follow, had to be shared. The gift was not private. There was a danger however, that passivity to the fundamental task of evangelization could arise:

We may have become somewhat nerveless, passively submitting and going our way quietly, but

needing a spur to remind us that "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence" and "the violent alone shall bear it away." Yes, we must do violence for the sake of the others who are threatened with losing their immortal souls. We must go out into the battlefield, we must pick up the wounded and anoint them. We must bring to them the treasures of the Precious Blood. The merits of the Sacred Humanity of Jesus are at our disposal. We must bring them to all around, and we must plead with the Eternal Father, by the Passion of Jesus, by His passion and death, to show mercy to the world. (Conferences "J", p 15)

There was an urgency to be experienced. Time was not something to be wasted in the tremendous task Jesus left to his disciples to carry out - the missionary task of proclaiming the kingdom now living on the earth:

Go then my children, fulfil your mission. Go, visit the widow, the fatherless and the afflicted, and keep your soul unspotted from this world. But who is the widow, and who are the fatherless you are to visit in the world? The widow is the soul bereft of its Lord. There are many who deny their Father, through we may not call them Fatherless, but oh, how far they have wandered from that good Father of whom all Paternity has its name! Let us bring them back. Let us inspire hope in hearts apparently hopeless. They have seen no power on earth capable of making right what is as wrong as they know their own poor hearts to be, and they doubt they can be ever righted again, disfigured, disjointed, broken to pieces, as they know their own poor souls to be. They doubt the good Father - they trust not his providence, they believe not in his power to restore, regenerate, to give them back the light and the liberty of the children of the image of God again. Ah Sisters! Let us go forth upon our works. We are children of the Mother of Holy Hope. Our hearts have been joined by her in a wondrous way to the Sacred Heart. There has been a fire of love lit from it, but a lamp that is lighted burns not, unless we watch and replenish it when necessary. Have we let that fire grow cold, that light grow dim, that was once right and burning (Conferences "F", p8)

The fire that had been lit in the heart of Mary Potter, and one she sought to maintain as the hearth fire of the institute, was simply love. A love that desired nothing but the good of the beloved. The call to be good news in the world was part of that love. It was to bear witness to the wonders that God had worked in the heart and soul of the individual and the community. If the Little Company was to love the world as Jesus had done, then they had to love it enough to die for it. That was the whole point of Calvary. That was the place where Love had its way with the world and conquered death. If the work of Love Incarnate was to be continued amongst his people, and the little ones of the kingdom fed the food of the just, then an inner and outer life of commitment had to be led.

Dear Children, our whole lives are devoted to saving souls, and our consecration to this, the grandest work that can be done, gives to our acts a great grace. We may seek here or there to do this or that. What can there be greater than serving God and saving souls. Let this be our principal object in life. To go about this beautiful world, to draw God's creatures to love him, (by this) we have fulfilled the end of our creation! (Conferences "E", No.7, p.16)

The work of evangelization would not happen unless the head and the heart of the congregation worked together with the hands and the feet. There were tasks to be done if the kingdom was to flourish works that would be performed in order that people might understand the reality of that kingdom, and be led into it. No work would exist for its own sake. It came into being from the complementary call given Mary Potter to Honour the heart of her Mother, and to save sinners dying.

Good God - Spare the Dying! [Back](#)

From the first concept of the congregation, and from the experience of her own spiritual journey, Mary Potter had been drawn to pray for the dying. With the gradual revelation of the pattern of the congregation, this work became central to all the other ministries which would be performed. Prayer for the dying was the primary call issued to the congregation:

We have to pray and work for the sick and the dying, that is the greatest and primary work of the Little Company of Mary. But, as well, there are many other ways in which we can help others to do good, and use the treasures of grace which God has given to all. (Conferences "K", No. 22. p.92)

There would be many 'other ways' of helping others which would be answered by the members of the Little Company, but prayer for the dying was part of them all. Such prayer contained the moment of Calvary. The constant prayer of the Little Company would echo Mary's cry on Calvary. It would echo the cry of Christ. It would be a never ceasing cry for Mercy for those who were dying in sin, therefore risking their eternal happiness. This was the natural follow through for the member of the society, for did not the rule demand that each sister offer herself as a Victim - "in union with the Holy Sacrifice"? Was not this oblation offered so that if her life would enable another to live, it should be taken? Mary Potter saw that such prayer for the whole of the world was part of the vocation of the Little Company - even as it was part of the total Christian call to 'lay down one's life for one's friend'. But, the special ministry of prayer for the dying was in response to a defined call - it had been a 'working word' given to Mary Potter:

"I have chosen you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain".
Yes, the fruit, the grace to the dying remains. It is forever. The work most needed of all works, the dying. (O.N. 1A, p.14)

Why was this work important? Because the moment of death was the moment of birth into God - the moment when the soul is re-united with its Creator. For Mary Potter, the dying - and in particular the dying sinner, had most need of that mothering care and love that was at the heart of the congregation. How could anyone stand aside and run the risk of one soul being lost - one soul losing its end and purpose for being? What Mary Potter had experienced in a moment of grace, was the agony of the soul condemned to an eternity of separation from its beloved: The experience, which was written down and entrusted to the care of Mother Cecilia, is given in full:

Devotion to the dying was a distinct inspiration. I had never seen anyone dying, or been mixed up with death in any way, but I believe God has made me experience since, what those "agonies" are what the word "agonies" means. It is certainly not given to those moments when the soul has to be severed from the body without meaning. Some years ago, on the Feast of St. Gertrude, these agonies apparently commenced. Those around me thought I was dying, though they knew not what I was

going through. How describe? Suppose a member of the body - only out of place: This is agony until replaced. Now, if this can be imagined all over the body. A powerful, strong wave sweeping over the shrinking body and withdrawing the life partly There is a vacuum --the sufferer is breathless and gasps, - the life seeks to return, but another powerful wave sweeps again with resistless force, withdrawing still more of that life. Again and again comes that mighty wave. Ah! Pray! The sufferer may be silent, and show nothing - too weak to give any sign of what is going on. The children of Faith, know that their God is love - and that they must bow to him at this moment when his instituted penance for sin - is being executed. They have a special Sacrament instituted to support this penance. But imagine a soul without faith feeling this mighty power, knowing that an omnipotent being alone could withdraw from the tenement it has held so long. What might happen? May God avert it. May God strengthen the prayer that emanates from Mary's Heart. Jesus, pity!

(Written by Mary Potter 1883, given to Mother Cecilia 1902, Recollections M. M. Cecilia Smith, p.43)

Such a powerful experience of the suffering of death could not help but draw Mary Potter to serve the dying. There was little that could be done for them materially, but the genuine warmth of love could stand with them, sharing the agony and praying for its ease. From her own experience, however, the terror of dying unreconciled to God, the boundless loss the soul would feel for eternity if it did die unreconciled, could not be born. Calvary had been the place of Mercy. The members of the Little Company would stand at that place of Mercy and plead that not one of the children of God die without knowing its benediction. Such a prayer, based on such an experience, cannot be heartless or automatic. It has to be filled with passion and longing - just as the heart of Mary was filled with passion and longing for those for whom her Son died, that they might know their truth in him, and thus win heaven:

The love of our Lady for the dying is the favourite thought of those who love her and are beloved by her, of those who have penetrated most deeply into the recesses of her loving heart. The hour of death may be, and is, in the offices of the saints, called the hour of birth. Mothers look forward to the birth of the children, and then remember no more the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So it is with our Lady: She is full of loving solicitude when their moment of death draws near, the precious moment in which her children will be born to a new and immortal life. She looks for us to help her in their extremity she looks for us to assist her to bring her child to birth.(L.H.M. P.101)

In this context, the place of the member of the Little Company is almost that of midwife to the soul. She is called to bring it to birth in Christ, to mother it forth to its new life in God. Constant prayer, constant vigilance would ensure that no one died alone. Over all the reaches of the earth, there would be a continual, pleading cry coming before the throne of God: A cry that would beg Mercy for the most Piteous - the dying sinner. That was the fundamental ministry that was to be performed for God's people. As mothers to the world, the members of the Little Company would sit in spirit, beside each dying member of the human family, that none might be lost. And this watch for the dying of the world would take place twenty four hours a day, before Christ present in the Eucharist (O.N. No. 5,P49ff).

Nothing should deter the member of the Institute from that work of Mercy. Some of the Sisters will remain ever watching and pleading before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament others will go forth in the same spirit of Calvary, to tend him in his

dying members to tend also, those who are in danger of the eternal loss of God - for these, they hope to obtain a grace, such as was accorded the good thief on Calvary. (Conferences "M", Compendium of the Rule. p.31)

Where possible, the vigil for the dying would be extended to nurturing care of those who were dying in their own homes. There were those within the congregation who would be called to do the works of the hands and the feet: These had been called to a ministry of physical caring. In their presence, they would pray and watch over their brothers and sisters, as they walked the awesome and lonely journey into newness of life. Opportunity to care for the dying would come, the Mother of Jesus would ensure that:

If we love the dying, she will give us the opportunities to assist them. She will send her angels to call those she knows will help her, whose love will give them power, whose faith and hope will enable them to work with her. (L.H.M. p.101)

And it was only love that would empower the members of the Little Company to serve the dying through prayer and action. A love that was not restricted by self interest or human respect. If the members were truly of Mary's heart and mind and will, then they would understand the depth of the sorrow of the Heart of Mary at the sight of the lost children of the earth - lost because they were unloved and uncared for by those who professed to be sisters and brothers to her Son. The task of the Little Company was to love enough to care, and to care without counting the cost:

We will, as loving children, come to solace that Heart, come to draw from it the grace to love others, grace to feel a little as Mary feels, grace to daily, hourly, pray for the dying, to help them as much as we can, and personally to visit them when we can.By doing this, we do an undying work - for if we obtain for a sinner a happy death, there can be no relapse, the work is done for eternity. (L.H.M. p.102)

But it was not only to the dying _sinner_ that the Little Company was called. Mary Potter knew well that each soul can be made more beautiful - more reflective of the glory it had been created to be. In her, there was an understanding of the need to deepen the love of God in the hearts of all the faithful. To evangelize meant to bring the good news of Jesus, not simply to those who did not know, but also to those who know, but who may be limited in their understanding, or capable of growing further into union with their God: Here again the spirituality of the Path of Mary was seen by Mary Potter as blessing to those who were sick and dying. It was a means of growing into intimacy with their Lord:

Do all that lies in your power to render that moment what it should be to God, most pleasing and precious in his sight do all that you can to make that death-bed a place where God blessed his child with unutterable love, and proclaimed it his very own, and in folding it to himself, imprinted upon it the kiss of everlasting peace. God grant this to us when we come to die, and God grant our mother may be there to help us at that momentous moment upon which our eternity depends. (op.cit. p.104)

Again and again Mary Potter returns to the theme, that the fundamental mission of the Little Company was to extend the Kingdom of God. It was a charge given by the nature of the gift and by the nature of the life that the members had chosen

to lead. The works that the sisters might perform, whilst good in themselves, were transitory, compared with the work of making the Kingdom happen in the hearts and minds of all they came in contact with.

Exterior works are so attractive, we seem to be doing so much when we are engaged in them for God's glory, that we do not realise that inward work which is to be accomplished: "Thy kingdom come"! What is it we ask for? That God may reign in all hearts. He will do so by means of Mary. If we extend her kingdom, we extend Christ's. Make Mary loved, her devotion practised and Jesus will be adored and worshipped wherever that sweet work, that lovely conception of his is known. Do you inculcate True Devotion? Do you teach it to your patients? Do you bring your Dying into the Little Company of Mary before they die? (Conferences "A" P.75 - 77, No. 4)

If the Little Company was to fulfil its mission, the questions had to be asked. The physical caring, whilst important, was not of the essence of the call:

You know dear children, the first object of our foundation is not to nurse, as so many suppose, and it is not right, too many of our sisters allow them to suppose. Our first object is to model Calvary, and form a united Body, representative to Heaven, mirroring that grand work of the Holy Ghost: The Mystery of Grace, Calvary. So on Calvary, we see the figures of our Institute. We see Jesus Crucified, shedding his precious Blood. Our Lady's Maternal Heart, pleading by that Blood to save souls. We see those three deaths. We watch the Happy Dismas, and long to co-operate with our Mother in thus saving souls at the last hour. To do this, we go out to attend the death bed of Christ's large family. He died for us all, we pray for all, and visit in spirit the death which we cannot attend in person. We are placed as sentinels, as witnesses at the portals of Christ's Church, that no soul may go forth for whom we have not prayed. (Conferences "A", p.33)

Whilst nursing was a part of the work of the Institute, a natural and complementary work, the actual care of the sick had developed alongside the nursing of the dying. It was not a foundational concept:

We attended in person as many deaths that we could, and thus, having to be at the death, necessitated attending the sickness, and then all sickness naturally came to us, and we had to study to know what to do how to solace the sufferers and as we are bound to aim at perfection, we have to know our duty in nursing the sick, and not disgrace our Mother who is Saedes Sapientiae. (ibid).

What Mary Potter feared above all, was that the Little Company would betray its origins, the primary reasons for its being. Writing to her Sisters she said:

It is well it should be known what spirit you are, why you are founded. I tell you candidly my children, a simple nursing order would have no attraction for me. The greater part of our friends, much less the world at large, think of you only as Nursing Sisters, and we lose many useful and good subjects through this. How it is, I do not know, that the sisters who see people much more than I do,

are with their patients long hours in the sick room, and yet seem not to attract them to our Lady's heart, to lead them into her path, to show them the way to Calvary, by thus anchoring them to the Maternal heart, to sanctify their souls, and give so much more glory to God, so much more joy to our dear and Immaculate Mother.

We were not founded simply to tend the body. It is an outcome of our devotion to the dying. It is our Lady's maternal love made her lead her children to the dying bed, that they might take her place of Mother, where a Mother shows so beautifully - the dying place of her child. It is a devotion that all rise to. (O.N. Vol.4, P34)

Nursing the sick and the dying was a part of the vocation of the Little Company, but it - like all other ministries which were to be undertaken, - were for the primary purpose of enabling the work of the Spirit in the hearts and souls of all men and women. Beyond everything else there was a call to enter into life at all levels to lead people into their path of holiness:

Let this be our principal object in life - to go about this beautiful world to draw God's creatures to love him. We have fulfilled then the end of our creation. ..dear children, our whole lives are devoted to saving souls, and our consecration to this - the grandest work that can be done - gives to our acts a great grace. We may seek here or there to do this or that. What can be greater than serving God and saving souls. By God's helping grace, we seek to bring (him) souls. (Conferences "E", No. 7. p.16)

If souls were to be saved, there was room enough to work for them in the world, and Mary Potter had a vision and a heart that would seek out the lost and the stray wherever they would be, her emphasis always on the spiritual nature of the mission and ministry. If prayer and care for the dying had led to participation in the health care ministry, following the gospel injunction "I was sick and you visited me" - to what other areas had the Little Company been called?

To a world in need [Back](#)

In a conference written to the members of the Little Company of Mary (Conference "F", P. 11-13), Mary Potter wrote down the fundamental characteristics she saw as being essential to the Mission and ministry of the congregation.

Firstly, if an individual sought to live her life within the parameters of the Little Company then, according to the insights of the founder, they would have to have a total commitment - a zeal for souls, for "we are an entire oblation of ourselves for the good of others." There was no reason for the effort of becoming holy if it was pure self interest. God would call the member of the institute to union, in order that they might be motivated to help others. Secondly, there was the characteristic of maternal care. That 'mother love' which was so important to Mary Potter, and a grace that she had received, was essential to determining the manner in which ministry would be carried out: "What mother love have we? Why, the brute creation might reproach us: a poor hen with its chicks might teach us how to love!" This 'mother love' would dare all things, attempt all things, for the sake of the children of God. It was a love that was not selective or demanding, but rather a love that would stand with the outcast, the lonely, the sinner and the rejected, always open and ready to assist. It was not intrusive or controlling, but rather a presence of 'being with', in order to support and sustain, comfort and nurture those who needed

such care.

The third characteristic for ministry and mission, was the ability to see Christ in the hearts of his people - even when that image was blurred or disfigured by frustration, pain, poverty or sin. The member of the Little Company had to look beyond the surface, to see into the heart of the individual, and to understand that Christ was present in all. Sin did not alter the fact that God lived in his creation, his people. His love was not altered by sin, it was merely hidden, rusted over, by ignorance, doubt, fear, confusion, and all the other forces that the sins and violence of the world placed upon it. The question each member of the Institute had to answer was: "Do we see our dear Lord in the persons of our sister, the poor, the sick whom we serve? " This capacity to see the person, not the sin, was to truly know the blessedness of being, which in turn would lead the sister to the final point for mission and ministry: "The spouse of Jesus, the child of Mary, fashioned after her heart - those who have bound themselves to be Mothers to Christ's neglected children (does) not forget those confided to her care, never ceases to have pity on them, but throws her whole heart and soul into showing her love of God, by loving his".

This willingness to embrace 'Christ's neglected children', pointed to the direction of ministry. Whilst the care of the dying and the sick transcended economic barriers, there was a call to the heart of Mary Potter, to minister to those who were 'neglected'. And that neglect was most clearly seen in the face of the poor, who were neglected on all levels.

When Mary Potter began her ministry in Nottingham, the full direction of her ministry began with the urban poor. Within their midst, she began processes to educate, to feed, to clothe, to share with the poor, from the comparative 'wealth' of her presence and person. As she ministered, she came to understand, on the one hand, the genuine fraternal love that poverty bred in those it held - and on the other, the sinfulness it was - the way in which poverty of position could lead to bitterness and evil within families, amongst different groups. The love she discovered led her on, the evil she confronted challenged her to love more: The evil of poverty would be overcome by loving, and the sharing of the hope that rested in Christ:

Let us bring them back. Let us inspire hope in hearts apparently hopeless. They have seen not power on earth capable of making right what is as wrong as they know their own poor souls to be, and they doubt they can be ever righted again, disfigured, disjointed, broken to pieces, as they know their own poor souls. They doubt the good Father - they trust not his providence, they believe not in his power to restore, regenerate, to give them back the light and the liberty of the children of God. They doubt that their souls can ever bear the image of God again. (Conf. "F", p. 8)

Love for the little ones of the kingdom would cause Mary Potter to repeat over and over, that the work of the Little Company was to be as varied as the needs of the people of God. In her writings to the first sisters, she states:

See Mary with the young catechumens, I see her at the bed of death, see her working with the apostles in her quiet, simple, hidden way. In what ways may we not imitate her if we choose....In our Little Company there is the work of instructing and catechising, as well as that which must always look upon as our chief work - the assistance of the dying. We would not be like Mary if we were confined to one special devotion... (M.C.10., 115)

This vision of the Little Company as being involved with a variety of works in the Church is heightened through her other conferences. There she states:

Our Lady's children would lose entirely her spirit if they preferred grand hospitals to the little houses over which she presides, the Sweet Mater Hominum, Mother of the whole human family, which God had given her. We strove, when they came, to make them feel welcome. They came fearlessly, and we looked upon them as the favourites of God, his poor, whom he so loved on earth. They were sacred trusts to us. And we felt honoured to have it so. Morning noon and night they came, and the soup-pot was always ready on the stove for them, so that those who needed it could have it at any hour, when tea or coffee would have been no use to them. We begged and worked for them. We visited them in their cottages, and how many little infants would have died without baptism, if it had not been for the sisters. (Conferences "R", p. 61)

Living and working among the poor, there were works to be done which were works of practical assistance, such as can be seen from the above extract. The members of the early Company, begged for the poor, supplied them with food and clothing, gave an education to the young and the old and cared for them when ill or dying. But, wherever the work was done, it was done as part of Church. It was a work that was ecclesial by its nature - sharing in the full responsibility of evangelization as well as philanthropic assistance. For Mary Potter, the work among the poor, on what she called the "Mission", was an essential part of the spirit of the Institute.

Mission work is one of the works of the Little Company of Mary. It is very evident that God wishes us to be occupied with his vast family, since he has so blessed this work wherever the Little Company have engaged themselves in helping the priest with his Mission work. What blessings have been attached, what souls saved. Conversions, instructions, united with our interior life, help to our own sanctification, as well as to the expansion of Christ's kingdom. (AN p.44)

From a participation in the corporal works of mercy, in a variety of ways, grace would be given, and the Little Company would represent more truly the universality of its mission to save souls.

Poverty exists on all levels, however, and Mary Potter knew the struggle of women in her own time. From her own commitment to Motherhood as a participation in God - an image of God, she saw the women of her own society oppressed and neglected - and that, particularly among the poor. There were problems of incest due to poor housing (cf. Annals: Historical Material, Nottingham), teenagers who were "more sinned against than sinning" (Conferences "R" P.6), who were orphans or runaways, or the victims of exploitation (M.C. P.264).

For these, Mary Potter had enormous compassion. She initiated the "Guardian Angels Home" in London, drew up a programme to provide them with skills to enable them to run a home, get into 'service', or, in some cases, to enter the Convent (Conferences "R"). For such as these, some of the members were to take responsibility - they were to be Mothers to these motherless ones, and to be available to them for advice, counsel, and support. What was most necessary was compassion and non-judgemental love. In a letter to a woman who was in some kind of personal trouble, the

example is given of the tender compassion of a 'wise guide': Mary Potter wrote:

There is danger, in a case like yours, of doubting God's mercy and forgetting that it is infinite, and that the more we need it, the more we shall receive, and increase God's glory, in a way that we could not, if we had not so much need of it. God always draws good out of evil in a marvellous manner. From the fall of this world came the Incarnation - a greater good than the primeval innocence. A pure soul, lately writing, brings out the greatness of God's power - which is not greater than his will: "The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and the purity of penance of the Magdalen, are the works of God, and as such are equally admirable in our eyes". You say you made a mistake from the commencement. Nothing is irretrievable in this world of Mercy, where we can so glorify God by hope, especially at times when we are tempted to despair and to think that all is lost through one wrong step." (Letters "D" No. 45)

Compassion for Mary Potter, meant being an agent of mercy and the task that had been given was to search out the lost and the stray, and to bring them home. Over and over again, the members of the Institute are encouraged to be for all - no matter how hard, how tiresome, or how terrible. Thus, in the early years of foundation, there would be work for the sisters in seeking to reclaim the alcoholics through participation in the Temperance league (Nottingham, Historical Material), homes for the poor, homes for the deprived women and girls, and always hospitality within the convents for those who needed it.

Hospitality was not a matter of politeness - it was a demand from the very vocation to which the members had been called. Again, taking the point from the requirements needed to be truly evangelical, and loving in service, Mary Potter would storm against the thoughtlessness of those who would turn people away from the convent 'homes of our Lady', saying they were too busy to attend. In a sad account of a woman who had come to the convent in Rome for support, and who had been turned away for just that reason, Mary wrote:

Perhaps God had permitted this to happen to teach us a lesson and make us examine our consciences as to how we keep our Rule of "Imitation of the Maternal Heart of Mary". Are we Mothers? Not in heart, but in deed and in truth - bringing certain souls into our midst. Those we take to ourselves, God has sent them. We cannot be too busy to do our duty, and God's family must not be neglected for anything.....Ah, think, have you ever sent our Lord away from the door saying: "I have looked for one who would comfort me, and I have found none." If we have not looked at matters in this pure spiritual light, let us sorrow over the past, and commence anew." (Conferences "F", No. 31, p. 71)

The particular grief for Mary Potter, and the occasion that prompted the conference to the Congregation, was that the woman - who was known to Mary Potter, having been turned away, committed suicide! If the Little Company was to prevent just such despair and hopelessness in the world, then hospitality, and a constant welcome was important. The community that failed to embrace the task, was failing to live up to the spirit, the vocation, of the Little Company:

If repugnance rises within, to seeing and advising those who come to you for counsel and comfort, treat this repugnance as a temptation. Be ashamed of it. Say: "Can I be weary of the image of Christ?"

Without this spiritual and true view of visitors, even general visitors (not bound to the Little Company especially), even ordinary visitors, receive as guests of Christ. But those who are affiliated - they are entitled to the greatest attention. It must be coming home to them, whenever they visit or return from some work. It must be "home". Here again, we can make up for a glory that is dimmed - for a good home is a glory to God. Let Mary's "homes" make up to God. Let them be sanctuaries of Love, souls bound together, Mother and children, true to one another, true to their vocation. Therefore, true also to God. (O.N. 5, p.52)

Whatever the nature of the apostolic ministry, the work to evangelise through the Path of Mary, and the prayer and care for the dying of the world, was the melody line that played beneath the harmonies the works created. This was the fundamental option. The external activities, no matter how good in themselves, were not the end. There could be no personal ambition, no personal motives in the ministries performed. They were to serve the people of God, and to be seen as secondary to the prime motive of winning souls to the Father, and to their own individual beauty in him. In all the ministry, there was a danger of becoming too invested in the task, and not in the spiritual dimension of the mission. If the Little Company were to truly live the spiritual reality of being Eucharist to the world, of being Mothers to all those in need, it would be necessary for the Little Company to embrace the life of poor pilgrims, who were ready to move on when and if the occasion demanded.

We had no personal motives, but only the glory of God and the good of souls, the spirit in which I hope, we may always work. For religious to cloak ambition under the appearance of zeal is a fatal error, and we certainly have seen there is plenty of work to do in God's Church, and if we give up a good work we are doing in one place, we can go to another. (A.N.p.42)

This willingness to move according to the needs of the world was an important concept to Mary Potter. There was to be no conflict between the Little Company and other religious congregations. No squabbling over tasks or territory. The one thing necessary was to work for the kingdom:

The Little Company has never come into collision with other orders, for this is most dis-edifying in any Christians, but much more so in those who are bound to aim at perfection. May God avert this evil from his Mother's Little Company, and let them ever work in the spirit of their Mother, only anxious that good should be done - that God's kingdom should be extended on earth by all whom they can influence, avoiding self in what they do, never mind (ing) giving up to others where they see it can be done. The world is large, and everywhere the Little Company can do good work. (ibid)

There was work to be done. The world was large, and the numbers needed to work in the vineyard were small. From the commencement of her vision of the Little Company, there had existed another dimension of the group. A dimension that would come into existence from the sharing of the life and spirituality of the institute. This group of people would form the lay arm of the Company. They would be the "Family" of the Little Company, and some of them would be called, Mary Potter had no doubt, to share the life of the Little Company, not as religious, not as a third order, but as associates - associates in mission and ministry, that the kingdom may become a reality upon the earth.

Associates in Mission [Back](#)

From the first moments of the dream becoming a reality in the mind and heart of Mary Potter, there was a realisation that the Little Company of Mary was to be the 'heart' of a wider community. Whilst God had inspired her with the form and structure of the institute she was to found, it was also true that the plan for the wider 'Company' - or, as she herself called it, the 'Family' of Mary was directed by God.

This Family was built upon the spirituality of the Path of Mary. If one of the tasks of the Little Company was to introduce men and women to the 'good news' of Jesus, it was necessary that they be formed in a gospel spirituality, that would sustain them and their ministry in the world. Mary Potter knew that each individual Christian had a job to do, if the world was to be won for Christ, and that in order to do that work, support and encouragement was necessary. The Little Company would be the place of such nurturing. It would take upon itself the responsibility of those souls, who were drawn to the spirituality of the Institute, but who saw their place of action in the world in which they lived:

Influence then, my dear Sisters, all - by word, still more by example, by love. Love souls! They will then feel this love and love Jesus through you... they will be willing to suffer some little for Jesus' love. They will be glad to belong to those who are lovable, who have taught them to love God. They will glad to join the ranks of those who are banded together in one grand company, to ensure their salvation, to have a part in God's Church etc. (Conference "S", P.14)

To 'influence souls' was to share with them the spiritual wealth of the Institute. Because Mary Potter saw the wealth of the Institute lying in the transformatory power of 'True Devotion' - in its radical abandonment to anything other than God, she longed for the members of the Institute to give it to others. Mary herself had come to realise that God is far less something to be sought after - a goal to achieve - than a wonderfully waiting presence. A presence that seeks to enter into the heart of the one who is brave enough to let go mature wisdom, and enter into the way of a child - dependent upon its parent. The God who "shows himself to us with a mother's undying, unchanging love" (O.N. 5., p. 24), seeks to draw all to himself. The Little Company, which was to be an sign of that unchanging love to the world, was to provide a means of people entering into such Love, and of living it, within the state of life to which they had been called:

There are various kinds of flowers and fruits upon the earth, so also, there are various kinds of beauty in the human soul. We must each bring forth according to our own kind, not according to another kind, or disorder would ensue. What would be good in a contemplative nun, and be part of her perfection, might be positively bad in a domestic servant, and more than an imperfection in a wife and a mother. Grant dear Lord, to your sweet Mother's children, a special grace from your Holy Spirit. Enlighten them that they may know your holy will, and ever perform it in a perfect spirit, seeking not their own will, but Yours, and having no other wish or desire but to perform perfectly the duties of the state of life in which you have placed them. (M.C. 24, P. 255)

To lead people into holiness was part of the mission and ministry of the Little Company. This was to be done through

witness, but also through an active participation in spiritual development. Mary Potter had developed, in accordance with the half-spelled out design of De Montfort, a retreat, to prepare the soul to embrace the Christian life through the ratification of Baptismal vows, and the consecration to Mary. These 'Spiritual Exercises' had been formed:-

to reform, regenerate, renew the soul: that is, apply to the soul the Precious Blood, as Jesus desires it should be applied. All who have entered on the narrow way of perfection, all who are desirous of living true holy Christian lives, have need of many helps...they have much to overcome, they have many hindrances in the way of perfectionThese spiritual exercises are intended to remove from the soul all impediment to grace they are intended to purify it, to renew within it its baptismal innocence, and render it an object of love and delight to God...(Spiritual Exercises, Introduction.)

Those who had been attracted to the spirituality of the Path of Mary, were to be assisted in their formation init through the practise of these Exercises:

The Sanctuary of the heart of Mary must be a place of refuge a place of retreat for members in the world, who will come and be consecrated to Mary, after having passed through the preparatory exercises...Those who come to make a retreat in the convent, or who make it in their own homes, must also learn to clothe themselves with Mary. ...those who wish to make a retreat must be received with joy by Mary's own, as they receive the little wayfarer from the world as Mary would.(M.C. Conference 24)

The members of the Little Company would take the role of spiritual guides, assisting others through prayer and direction. There would be a sister assigned to them to be 'Mother'- not in a sense of over maternal protectiveness, but in the sense of watchful care. The role of such a member of the institute was to encourage and support the endeavours of the retreatant: They were to " Pray earnestly for it, as a mother would pray for her child. Make its sojourn as peaceful and as happy as is possible, and then send it back again into the world to be a little apostle of Mary, to make known true devotion to her, and to endeavour that numbers may follow its example and enter one of Mary's homes, to be born again in her. (ibid)

Mary Potter understood that the world was the place of holiness for the majority of God's people. There was no barrier to the soul achieving its union with God in the world. If a person could be opened out to the ever waiting presence of God, and if they could learn to live lives of trustful abandonment to the will of God, and live it in the spirit of Mary, then holiness would follow:

There is a mistaken idea in many who desire perfection, that it is not to be found in the world. In this they are wrong. People may attain as high a perfection (and certainly, since perfection consists in doing the will of God), a higher perfection, in the world as in the cloister. There can be no doubt that if it is God's will they should remain in the world, he will give them grace to perfect themselves there, for perfection is to be attained by our corresponding with whatever it is that God wills for us. (ibid)

Once a person had begun to live 'in the spirit of Mary', however, it was necessary for them to be encouraged along the way. Here again, the Little Company would have a part to play, for there would be, among those who entered the path, some who would wish to deepen their spirituality - to enter it more fully, but who did not feel that they were called to take upon themselves the life of a religious. Mary Potter realised that there would be such individuals, and her own understanding of the different ways of living the God-life, led to her welcome those who wanted to live a life of dedicated witness and labour without the necessary binding of religious life: These women were the fulfilment of part of the vision Mary Potter had had, of the total 'Company of Mary' as representative of Calvary. The women who desired to become 'affiliated' to the Little Company, represented the holy women, who stood in attendance on the dying at Calvary. They would be those, who by prayer and service, sought to enter into the works of the congregation, as well as its spirit. These affiliated would join in the spiritual and temporal works of the congregation: Writing of the plan for the affiliated, Mary wrote:

For a quarter of a century, the Little Company of Mary has had affiliated in various ways, young girls and others in the world, who were especially consecrated to our Lady, and are known as Mary's Own. The affiliated form various ranks and degrees: The first give themselves to our Lady in an special manner and on the day of their admission, recite aloud the Act of Consecration of Blessed De Montfort, thus imitating the Novices of the Little Company of Mary, who when they receive the holy habit, consecrate themselves entirely to our Lady in union with the infant Jesus.

The second degree are still more intimately united with the Little Company, by being enrolled in the Confraternity of the dying, and thus assisting the sisters in their work for the dying, principally with their prayers, but also when possible, by their attendance. This degree of the affiliated, imitating more especially those sisters of the Little Company, who, having passed through the hidden life of the noviciate, make the Triennial vows, and walk with Jesus the way of the Cross.

Those of the third degree, have made a still more complete oblation of themselves, offering themselves to God as victims for the Church and the Pope, and they receive a ring, which betokens they are wedded to Rome.These rings used to be blessed by the late Pope Leo XIII....and it was at his wish that the sisters of the Little Company of Mary extended their own special spirit to those, who, living in the world, wished generously to devote themselves to God's honour and glory in these troublesome times, accepting with a voluntary 'ecce' that, to which they were only obliged to say a compulsory 'fiat'. This last degree mirrors those sisters who have made their final vows and have thus become spouses of Jesus Christ. (Conf: "S": Our Lady's Guild: Rules for the affiliated)

In answer to criticism what she was simply founding a Third Order, Mary wrote to sisters, that there "was but one order - one Company of Mary - we in the Convent are the 'Little' Company of Mary, the other the 'Greater'. We, as we have said, the heart, animating the whole..."(Conf: "S" P. 18).

This concept of being the hub of a wheel was important for the manner in which the Sisters would treat those who sought to be affiliated with them.

We do not give the Association the name of Third Order, this would scarcely give the idea that is

embodied in the Spouse of Jesus taking to herself the great company, his family - "thy family shall be my family". The feeling of the sisters is maternal, and the affiliated are not to them as outsiders, but part of the family, of the household, and, as we have said before, the friendless must find a friend, the homeless a home. We trust that those who claim our protection, will ever receive from us that truest and most faithful of all loves - a mother's. (Conference "S", p.44)

From the beginning, Mary realised that some of those who sought affiliation would be those who the members of the Little Company had lifted to wholeness - the girls of the Guardian Angels home - the 'reclaimed sinners' etc. What she always sought to impress upon the Sisters was that whilst some of the affiliated might have come from less than salubrious circumstances, their entrance into the Path of Mary, their acceptance and commitment to living a new life in Christ, was the one thing necessary. The Sisters who had charge of those affiliated had to love and love totally those given into their care:

The sanctuaries of the Maternal Heart must be their home. They must feel and know that the sisters who have the duty of looking to the affiliated, must be Mary like. Though naturally many (of the affiliated) may be unfortunate, still there is the model - A Mother with her children: A good mother may be weary, but still her children know her love, and that their affairs ever interest her, especially those (affiliated) who live in the house. (Ibid)

Those who would become affiliated, whether as interns or as external associates, would know the love of their sisters. They would be united in spirit and in fact with the works and the prayer life of the Little Company. There would be a unity of mind and heart and will between the 'little' and the 'greater' company. The lay associates would:

..help in the general works of the Little Company. They belong to it they must never be ordered about as though they were domestics, but the greatest consideration must be shown, as they wear not the habit, but it must be remembered always, they are part of the Company of Mary - and a most important part. (ibid)

If this part of the congregation was 'a most important part', then it was up to each sister to involve herself in making it a reality. It was part of the evangelising mission of the Little Company, even as it was a part of the ministry. This area of work could not be ignored or betrayed by silence:

I give the blessing of Obedience both of the written rule and the living rule, to those who strive to affiliate young girls who are not drawn to a vocation, and do not feel that God calls them to make perpetual vows, and yet wish to seek the shelter of the sanctuary - not bound by vows, but by a simple bond of charity, retaining their money, if they have any if not, striving to earn their living by working for the community, animated by its spirit, and certainly finding spiritual and temporal help, whilst they assist the sisters in their many works which they are called on to perform in different parts of the world. ("S", Conf. 9. p. 30)

Those who would be internal associates would: "reside in the convent and aid the sisters in such works of mercy as in these troubled times, are not easy of permissible for religious to undertake" (Ibid). They would be part of the total community, sharing in the prayer and recreational life of the sisters, as well as in the ministry. They were not 'hired help', but integrated members. The reason for their being with the sisters was twofold: Firstly, some, as has already been stated, would join because they felt drawn to a form of commitment, though not through vow, to a community lifestyle secondly, there would be those who by affiliation to the Little Company would be based upon their own need - to involve themselves in ministry and community life for more 'human' reasons. In this, Mary Potter had a rather unique view. She believed that the widow, the orphan, the homeless ones had a right to be with the Little Company. That if the 'sanctuary of Mary's Heart - the convent homes of the Little Company, were to be what they professed to be, then the 'little ones of the Kingdom' would be welcomed, and their talents, - often not seen, or despised by the world - would be made welcome and utilized - for the sake of that same kingdom. She wrote:

We are more than ever convinced of the importance and necessity of keeping many wayfarers in the world from the dangers which surround them, and threaten both soul and body, simply because they "stand idle all the day". Their affiliation to the work of the Little Company will protect and shield them: those for instance, without a home or object in life, can find their home in the convent, where they may be employed to assist the sick and dying. There is a large field of work for the Great company of Mary. Those who cannot do active work can assist by prayer for the dying, and thus a wide and holy work is open to those who, for various reasons, cannot become nuns. (ibid)

The mind boggles at the challenge issued here - the demand for the members of the Little Company to be totally engaged with the world, with an unremitting powerful and liberating love. The affiliated - far from being the pious ones alone, would be drawn from what many would perceive to be the off-cuts of society - the loveless, the lonely, the heart-broken. They were to be formed into missionaries and carers, 'for the sake of the kingdom.' The problem was, however, that the Sisters of the Little Company had to take seriously the call to evangelise the world - to bring people to an awakening of their loveliness and ability to do and be something in the Kingdom of God, and that required commitment and love. But, it had to be done, if the true reality of the role and function of the Little Company as to be realised.

Now to sum up for the future. You will strive to extend the Company of Mary, increase our Lady in heaven, on earth, and Purgatory. You are going to beautify souls by teaching them this devotion to our Lady. We may call it Jesus devotion to her. We are going to bring those we can influence in the world, to be affiliated to the Little Company, and strive for some practical way of teaching the devotion, so that people do not simply make the act, but impress their lives deeply, imbue their souls with sound spirituality this is devotion after Jesus' heart, and whilst leading others, we shall progress ourselves. (Conferences "A", p. 76)

(The organisation and development) of our Confraternities, the Calvary Confraternity, the Affiliated or "Pie Donne" and the Victims all needs time, but it is time well spent, for it is increasing and encouraging that great company of Mary in the world, by means of the Little Company which our Mother has enclosed in her Maternal Heart, and on which she has bestowed such graces. (Conference K., No. 22 p. 92)

Without the organisation and ongoing development of the affiliated, Mary Potter knew well that the movement would fall short of what it was intended to be. Furthermore, the work that the Little Company had been called to do, would suffer. The affiliated would be true associates on Mission, taking part in all the ministries of the Little Company:

Through the affiliated or associates, as they may be called, not being formed into a proper body, we lose many useful members who would be of vast use to us, enabling us to extend our Lady's domain on earth, spread her colours, grow nearer and dearer to Jesus, by teaching others True Devotion, which means our Lord's devotion.....There being a large field of labour in the Little Company of Mary, no one need be idle, and those who cannot do active work, can assist in the perpetual prayer for the dying. (Conferences "S", No. 7, p. 24)

The affiliated members of the Little Company, whilst not being bound to rules and regulations were bound to the same mission and ministries of the Little Company. They were truly associates in ministry. Their contribution to the perpetual prayer life and the works of the congregation would be immense. They would be fired with the same desire as lit the hearts of the Sisters - but only if the sparks of that fire were shared. The desire to make the world one, to share the spiritual riches of the path of Mary, to comfort and stand with the dying of the world - all this and more was opened to lay women who chose to find a home within the sanctuary of Mary, as lay community members. But there were those who would not choose this affiliation, yet would want to support in some way the work of the Little Company. What was for them?

Never lost for a chance to make the mission of the Little Company available to co-workers for the kingdom, Mary Potter initiated a Confraternity of Calvary. This Confraternity operated on two levels. It was open to affiliated, who would adopt it as their commitment to mission and ministry within the Little Company, but it was also open to those who did not choose to enter the Path of Mary. For these latter, the commitment was to join with the Company in their prayer for the dying. This was a ministry of its own. There was no one who could not participate in praying for the dying. What was important, was that the ministry be spread amongst all people, so that souls who might die without the grace of God might be saved. Again the outreach was there. If the dying of the world were to be comforted and consoled and brought to the Father, then it was important that they be prayed for, sustained and given hope and courage by the prayers of others. All it required was a little less self-interest, and a little more 'family concern' for the people of God. This too, was part of the dream, part of the call to evangelise the world.

For Mary Potter, the one thing that was necessary to be part of the Little Company, was a commitment to love. Her life had been one great act of love. Her vision ranged over the whole of the earth, her heart heard the cry of the needy of the world, and she sought to answer. She also knew, with a great clarity, that only by co-operating with each other could the work of God be accomplished. God was unity itself. Unity was an expression of God. From the foundational community, through to the affiliated, the one thing necessary was a unity of heart and mind and will with the Will of God. To live 'as the will of God' was her one desire, and it was the desire of her heart, that those who followed her would embrace that same desire - not for themselves, but for the great desire of Jesus' heart, and the heart of his Mother - "Father, - Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." This was at the heart of the vision, the hope that would empower, if all who entered into the spirit and charism of the institute, were willing to embrace the Cross for the sake of the kingdom.

CONCLUSION [Back](#)

In Rome, some time before her death, Mary Potter had a dream, a dream which remained with her, and which speaks of the task that she and the Little Company had. It is worth retelling:

"One All Souls morning, when we lived near St. Mary Majors, as the early bells were ringing, I woke from a strange dream. I seemed to be sitting in a room, bright and happy in God's presence. A knock came to the door. I got up and opened it, and oh - such a weird, dreary place was laid to view neither dark nor light:-it scarcely seemed like the outer walls or a building either, but it was very desolate, without any doors or windows. There seemed to be partitions. As I stood looking out, chilled, something made me cast my eyes down. I saw a sweet upturned face, with golden hair streaming down. I quickly said, as though in answer to the knock: "Come in ". The plaintive voice that answered me ran through me the whole day long: How can I come in unless you take me up?" Then I looked still more, and saw there were no it had neither arms nor body. This I had not noticed before, for it did not look strange until I looked down to lift it up. I stood looking, and remember the feeling: What could I do? I could not take it by the hair, it was like a round globe. Then came a thought. I stretched out my two arms, put them right around, took it to my breast, and -awoke! Although I never notice dreams, that sweet voice sounded on my soul for many a day: "How can I come in, unless you take me up?" (O.N. Vol. 3. p.5)

How indeed! But Mary Potter found her answer: "I spread my two arms, put them right around took it to my breast..." She was prepared to leave the warm comfort of a loving God and move into a strange, often desolate world. She understood that - if one seeks to live a gospel life, then there is not one area of life that can be neglected, not one chance missed, if we are truly desirous of bringing the living, the dying, the dead, into the fullness of God. This was the one meaning to life. And Mary the Mother of Jesus, would lead those who chose to follow her. She would teach them how to live and be for others, as she lived and was for her Son and those who followed him.

The Little Company of Mary had been called to be to the world as Mothers. They were to invest themselves in the suffering at the heart of the world, and to seek to ease it by prayer and works. They had been called to carry out a mission that would seek at all times to bring home to the world, the wonder of Christ's love the outpouring of the Mercy of God on Calvary. They would provide a means for all men and women to grow into their own unique holiness, and they would offer a chance to lay people, to live a committed and apostolic life which would be supported by the loving presence of the members of the Little Company. The task was to bring Christ to birth in the world. But how?

In the words of the dream of Mary Potter, on All Souls day, the cry at the heart of the world is: "How can I come in, unless you take me up?". The response of those who have been called to follow the path of Mary, through the Little Company of Mary is equally clear: To stretch out our two arms, put them right round, and draw it to our breast. That way we live the truth of who we have been called to be. As we move through the struggle and the pain of our own refounding - there is much in Mary Potter - our Founder

- to give us hope and courage. She loved life, loved God, loved all things that were of her world, and in her own way, in her own historical circumstance brought to birth a dream of a new way of living and loving. It was born in

her heart, and of God. It has, I believe, much to give to us, as we ask the questions that are important to us now. One thing only is necessary, that we remain faithful to the truth of who we are in the Church, and according to the vision of the Founder. Mary Potter knew that the only way of preventing a 'false spirit' from entering into the heart of the Institute was to constantly reflect upon it. She wrote to her sisters - she writes to us:

Dear Sisters,
Who are we? Why are we? And where are we?
These are thoughts we must put to ourselves day
after day, and never weary of them, for then we
have our pivot our acts will revolve around them.
We shall not be as those taking aim carelessly,
without heed - but we will know what we are aiming
at, and we will keep to that point we will! So
help us God.

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Tooting Bec,
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