**Founders and Futures**

**The Founding Stories and Tomorrow’s vision for Le Chéile Schools**[[1]](#footnote-2)

At 6 a.m. on May 5th 1861 a 51 year old Waterford woman in poor health who had devoted herself to the care of the “sick poor” in Dublin and especially the welfare of orphans was released from the Female Penitentiary in Grangegorman where she had spent the previous six months having been sentenced to jail for contempt of court. She made her way down to the church on Arran Quay where she went to Mass and after that she walked up to Drumcondra, to her house in Eccles St. Four of the six friends and co workers with whom she shared the house were gone – the notoriety of her imprisonment and all the attendant publicity proved too much for them. So Margaret, that was her name, had to gather her energy once again and start over. It is a testimony to her remarkable spirit that within five months she had opened her first school, St Bridgid’s at no 10 Crow Street in Temple Bar and within a year she would have seven companions living with her in Eccles St, all of them devoted to the care and education of children. This amazing woman is Margaret Aylward, the foundress of the Holy Faith Sisters and in this the bicentenary of her birth we can safely say her story lives on[[2]](#footnote-3). What I want to do in this talk is to reflect on what it might mean to say that the story lives on, because to say that in the context of Catholic education in Ireland and in particular in the context of the emergence of the Le Chéile Schools Trust in the first decade of the new millennium is not to appeal to nostalgia or sentiment about a bye gone era it is to make a bold statement about who we are and what we are called to share in. I will come to that presently but first let’s undertake a little time travel as we look at a few more snapshots of some truly inspirational and heroic women and men.

The same year that Margaret Aylward got out of prison, a great event was taking place in the town of Bunclody in Co Wexford. A school was being opened by an order that was relatively new to Ireland. The Faithful Companions of Jesus had arrived in Limerick in 1845. Their foundress Victoire de Bengy, later to be known as Mother Marie Madeliene D’Houet, was another remarkable human being. She was born in 1781 in France and grew up in the context of the turmoil of the French Revolution witnessing all around her the social, religious and political upheaval of the time and though from a privileged background she sought to relieve the misery that surrounded her. Married at the age of 23 she and her husband Joseph worked as volunteers in a local hospital. Within months and as a result of his work in the hospital Joseph contracted typhoid fever and died.

Now as a young woman Victoire finds herself a heartbroken widow and several months pregnant. She soon gave birth to a son and over the next fifteen years as she raised him she was seeking to respond to what was going on around her and doing so through the lens of faith. A key moment in her story occurred on Holy Thursday in 1820 when in prayer the words “I thirst” spoken by Jesus on the Cross seemed to be addressed directly to her and she founded her congregation to respond to those words. In contexts of violence, poverty and political chaos girls and women needed desperately to know their worth as human beings. The Faithful Companions of Jesus knew that through the work of Christian education they would come to an awareness of their dignity and embrace life accordingly. Needless to say Marie Madeliene was not the only person in France to see the vital role that an education given from a faith perspective could play in changing the lives of the young.

A contemporary of hers whose live was hugely influenced by the barbarity and near anarchy that accompanied the revolution was Claudine Thévenet. She was born in Lyons in 1774 into a well to do family of merchants but like Marie Madeliene she was to witness at first hand the horrors of living in a deeply divided society. While still a teenager she saw the brutal execution of her two beloved brothers and was marked by this for the rest of her life – in particular by their dying wish that she would forgive those who were responsible. By the year 1818 after trying in various ways to alleviate the dreadful conditions experienced by children orphaned or abandoned as a result of the conflict she decided to dedicate her life entirely to the young and in particular to those in greatest need. Commenting on this decision she remarked: “It seemed to me that I had entered on a presumptuous undertaking which offered no guarantee of success.” Now almost two hundred later her Congregation the Religious of Jesus and Mary are to be found all over the world and not least in Ireland.

Three more congregations that are members of the Le Chéile schools Trust were to come out of the cauldron that was revolutionary France. Each of them began as all the congregations do, not with a grand plan delivered with precision and clarity but with a person reflecting on and trying to respond to the situation in which they found themselves and doing so from a perspective of a Christian faith that could not be lived merely as obedience to a set of commandments but as a response to the experience of the living God offering the possibility of hope, compassion and transformation in a world marked by chaos and confusion.

Anne Marie Javouhey founded of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny in 1807. Nine years earlier she had decided to devote her life to God having been working with the children who were caught up in the turmoil. So successful was she in her efforts to provide education for the young that she was asked by the French government in 1822 to establish schools in the colonies. She witnessed at first hand the plight of the recently emancipated slaves and the indigenous peoples and immediately set about addressing their needs – a policy that made her many enemies.

Around the same time as Anne Marie Javouhey was beginning her missionary work a young priest from Normandy , Fr Louis Lafosse who had been caught up in a very direct way in the Church State clash in the aftermath of the revolution, recognised the need for the education of young girls in a family atmosphere. In 1817 he invited four women to join with him in this venture and from it grew the Religious of Christian Education. His congregation pioneered new teaching methods and stressed what we might call a holistic approach to education. By the end of the nineteenth century their schools were flourishing in England as well as France and are represented in Ireland today by Our Lady’s in Terenure.

Still in France in the nineteenth century another Louis would come at the situation from a different background and perspective. Louis Bautain was a philosopher caught up in the fervour of enlightenment thinking and the emphasis on the role of reason. However he was dismayed at what had transpired in the aftermath of the revolution. Under the influence of a deeply committed Christian woman, Louise Humann, Louis Bautain rediscovered his faith and came to understand that the deep division that had arisen between faith and reason needed to be healed and that the way to do this was through education – characterised as the beautiful enterprise. The motto of the Sisters of St Louis, the congregation that grew out his collaboration with Louise Humann was “Ut Sint Unum” That they may all be one. These words taken from the Gospel of John drove their vision of a world unified healed and transformed by the saving wisdom of Christianity.

With all that we have heard we could be forgiven for thinking that The French Revolution and its aftermath was the only influence on education during the nineteenth century. However over a hundred years before the storming of the Bastille a young priest who had been attached to the Cathedral at Rheims and who had a very promising ecclesiastical career ahead of him became increasingly aware of the plight of the neglected poor and of moves on the part of some to provide quality schools for them. This awareness and a chance meeting with a very committed and devout layman took Jean Baptiste De La Salle away from his secure world into a venture that would have profound consequences not just for him but for countless hundreds of thousands of young people who have benefitted from a Lasallian Education.[[3]](#footnote-4) In 1684 he founded a congregation of lay men who would dedicate themselves to the ministry of education, especially the education of the poor. Thus began the setting up of a network of free schools throughout France that was to be characterised by teachers motivated to give of their best for the children in their care and properly trained to do. This emphasis on the key role of the teacher and the importance of teacher training, shared by many of the founders, was recognised as a major contribution to Catholic education and in 1950 John Baptist de La Salle was declared the patron saint of teachers by Pope Pius XII.

It is very possible that a young Irishman who was sent to France in the 18th century to complete his education which had begun in a hedge school and to study for the priesthood, came across the excellent network of Christian schools of De la Salle. However it was only when he returned to his diocese of Kildare after a number of years teaching in a seminary in France that Fr Daniel Delaney was forced to confront the plight of the Irish poor. Indeed his first reaction to the experience of poverty, lawlessness and drunkenness that he discovered was to want to go straight back to France! Thankfully he did not, partly under the influence of his mother who reminded him that he was needed at home. Straightaway as parish priest in Tullow in Co Carlow he set himself to address the question of the educational needs of the young realising that this was the most effective way to help them out of the mire in which they found themselves. Later in 1808 as Bishop Delaney he established two teaching congregations, the Brigidines and the Patricians both of which were to make a very significant contribution to the education in Ireland in the period after Catholic emancipation and which continues to this day, a point that is well made by the fact that Patrician celebrated their bi centenary in recent years and Patrician College Newbridge is celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year.

If we move now in our time travel to nineteenth century England the backdrop changes from political revolution to the industrial revolution and the impact its changes were having on society. In addition there were changes in the world of religion as the Catholic Church experienced a period of revival and growth after the repression of the penal laws. In one year two very different women from very different backgrounds would live through moments that would impact enormously not only on their own lives but on communities all around the globe and at this time they were unaware of each other.

In 1846 a devout young Anglican woman named Elizabeth Prout who had been attending lectures in a pub in the town of Stone in Staffordshire given by an Italian priest called Dominic Barberi finally decided to become a Catholic. This was one year after the conversion of John Henry Newman also hugely influenced by Fr Barberi. Elizabeth’s decision caused a split with her family but by 1852 and under the influence of Fr Barberi’s order the Passionists, she was encouraged to found a religious congregation in Manchester that would later be known as the Sisters of the Cross and Passion. As we have seen with the other founders this was no theoretical exercise but reflected a desire on her part to address to great needs of the poor women and girls many of whom were Irish immigrants fleeing the ravages of post famine Ireland. She too saw the key role education would play in a context where the horrors of poverty were exacerbated by widespread sectarianism.

In the same year that Elizabeth Prout converted to Catholicism in Staffordshire an American woman who was also a convert arrived in England in Derbyshire with her two youngest children as the foundress of a new Congregation, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. Her name was Cornelia Connelly and she was a very gifted teacher. Her remarkable story is yet another example of how a person of faith responds to all that life might throw at them including the death of three of her five children and the breakup of her marriage. She and her husband who was a minister in the Episcopalian Church in the US had converted to Catholicism in 1835. However his zeal for his new faith was such that he decided that he wanted to become a priest and in 1840 he sought permission from his wife to do so when she was pregnant with their fifth child. Over the next few years she set herself to discern what God was asking of her and this became clear to her when she was asked by Pope Gregory XVI to go to England to establish schools. Soon she and her sisters were running schools for poor and needy people, holding day, night and Sunday classes to accommodate the young factory workers, giving retreats, and helping in the parishes. With the passage of time Cornelia was recognised as an innovative educationalist whose methods and ideals were always inspired by the awareness of the humanity of the boy Jesus who the Scriptures tell us “grew in wisdom and grace”(Lk 2:52).

Returning again to 1846 this time to Banbury in Oxfordshire a French nun called Genevieve Dupuis from the Sisters of Charity of St Paul of Chartres arrived to set up a school for the poor in the parish of Fr Tandy. This was a successful venture but the links with the French Order were cut at the request of the bishop and so a new order with Genevieve at its head was formed – the Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle. Once again their focus was on education as offering empowerment and their work extended to addressing the needs of the local community. In her life time Genevieve Dupuis opened 88 convents Their motto, taken from the words of St Paul “All things to all people” sums up their desire to minister to people whatever their need and this has characterized their work in education in Ireland in Greenhills in Dublin and in Kilfinane Co Limerick.

Just as Corneilia’s work was getting underway in Derby, and Genevieve’s in Banbury a devout and caring young Anglican woman was volunteering to go and nurse soldiers with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War. Her name was Frances Taylor. Not only was she a very compassionate person she was also very intelligent and was given to thinking deeply about her faith. While nursing in appalling conditions in the war she came under the influence of some Irish Sisters of Mercy who were also nursing there. They impressed her profoundly and the faith of the young Irish soldiers also made its mark. At the same time she was having conversations with a Jesuit priest who was there as a chaplain. These factors and her ongoing personal search meant that by the time she returned to England in 1856 she had converted to Catholicism. Over the next thirteen years she would be engaged in a personal journey to discover what God wanted of her and this journey would culminate in the founding of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God in 1869. It was born out of her awareness of the miserable conditions in which so many people lived their lives and how that impinged on their sense of their own worth and dignity. Once again she saw education as a fundamental means to addressing their plight. It is interesting to note that during this time of her searching she had come across the work of Margaret Aylward and was deeply impressed by what she was doing. She visited Ireland several times and came to Carrigtwohill in 1875 to establish a convent where to this day St Aloysius’ School still thrives.

Our final snapshot in this very brief scan of the congregations is of the Dominicans. This is not a question of keeping the good wine to the end but an effort to highlight that what we have been considering in the stories touched upon so far is the whole question of charism. No doubt secondary schools for girls in Ireland were not in the mind of a young Spaniard called Dominic Guzman as he grew up in the latter part of the 12th century in northern Spain. However as with all the other founders we have considered he was keenly aware of what was going on around him and within him. As he saw the Christian message being misrepresented at the time of the Albigensian heresy he decided to dedicate his life to the work of preaching – a work that would be carried out by an new order he founded in 1206 – The Order of Preachers. His concern was for Veritas – the search for truth and to be guided in this search by faith. His order flourished both for both men and women and within a short period was having a huge influence in Catholic theology and philosophy through such intellectual giants as St Thomas Aquinas and St Albert the Great and the mystic St Catherine of Siena. It is known that there were Dominican Sisters in Galway in 1644 and that they came to Dublin in 1717 and to their current home in Cabra in 1819 when Sr Columba Maher arrived with four other sisters to open a primary school. That small venture was the beginning of the modern phase of the Dominican sisters’ outstanding contribution to Irish education.

So now having gone through this overview we are left with the question why bother? A casual observer on the educational scene in Ireland in 2011 might say that the conditions that gave rise to the Congregations and their commitment to education no longer obtain. It is now the State’s obligation to provide for the education of its young people and this it is capable of doing. However in Ireland we are in the interesting position of having legislation that recognises the value of the “founding intention” of the school and the importance of maintaining its “characteristic spirit” and there lies the link between the stories we have listened to and the reason for our being here as schools in the Le Chéile Trust. That link between the life stories of the founders and our schools as they operate today can be summed up in the very important word “*charism*”. This is what we might call a “theologically loaded” term and if the collaboration envisaged by the congregations when they established the Trust is to succeed then it is one we have to explore on an ongoing basis and I would like to spend a little time reflecting on its significance for us.

At the outset it is worth pointing out that *charism* is not to be identified with charisma which in our time and in ordinary conversation is a more widely used word. Charisma usually refers to certain qualities that an individual may possess that would mark him or her out as a gifted leader someone who will inspire others to follow a certain path or to commit to a particular cause. This understanding of the term may be attributed to the very influential work of Max Weber the German sociologist writing on leadership.[[4]](#footnote-5) However when we speak of *charism* we are not limiting ourselves to a focus on the particular qualities of a given founder we are considering rather a concept that lies at the heart of what Christians believe about God.

The word charism has its roots in the Greek word charis (carij)[[5]](#footnote-6). It is found in the New Testament some 156 times and it is frequently translated by the word grace or gift, but one dictionary of New Testament Greek suggests a range of meanings including “a special manifestation of the divine presence, power, glory, favour or blessing”. Underlying its use in the source documents of Christianity is the idea of God as the source of every grace or gift. Jesus in his life and ministry is the embodiment of this gift. His works of teaching, healing, compassion and forgiveness are all expressions of the grace of God freely given and operative among us. They are a witness to the reality of what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. i.e. God’s will for the world. John affirms in his gospel that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and that through him we have received “grace upon grace” (John1:14). Part of our difficulty today when it comes to speaking of this is a linguistic or semantic one. For many the language of grace is linked exclusively to the realm of piety. However for the writers of the New Testament this gift is what makes it possible for us to live a fully human life (Jn 10:10). We are made fully alive when we catch a glimpse of how much we are loved – this is the gift of God in Christ, it is the Good News, this is the original *charism*! Amazing as this insight is, it is enhanced in the NT by the realization that through the Holy Spirit (which is the Spirit of Jesus) that is given to the believer we not only receive the gift, we become bearers of it to others. St Paul puts it this way: “The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that we have received.”(Romans 5:5) For Paul this means that baptism, through which we receive the Holy Spirit, is a call to share in the mission and ministry of Jesus, to share in his *charism* – to become a witness to the compassion of God. Writing to the young Christian community in Corinth Paul summed it up in this way:

“Now there are a variety of gifts[[6]](#footnote-7) but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1Cor 12:4-7).

It is not surprising therefore that the word *charis* in the New Testament is often linked to an inner power or strength (Acts 4:33, 6:33). The gift empowers the believer to undertake the task, to accomplish the mission, aware that he or she is involved in something that transcends the self and points always towards the Kingdom. “Like good stewards of the manifold **grace** of God, serve one another with whatever **gift** each of you has received.” (1Pet 4:10). In the Scriptures Jesus is not described as one who came to tell us what to do he does not seek to impose a new morality – rather he came to tell us who we are in God and to invite us, indeed to challenge us to live out of that giftedness.

Throughout its history the Church has recognised that the fundamental gift – the Holy Spirit - has been at work in the lives of particular people and in the ministries of particular religious congregations.

Their *charism* involves a particular call to faith. It is a way of reading and responding to the Christ in a particular time and place. In the stories of the founders that we have touched upon this is precisely what was unfolding as they journeyed through life. They were not seated in ivory towers removed from reality but immersed in the world of their time, its pain, its problems and its opportunities. Their *charism* involved a particular experience and expression of the gift of Christ who embodies the effective love of God in the world. This understanding of *charism* means that it is not just about specific individuals and the way they responded in faith. It emphasizes that the effect of their witness is also a gift to the Church, a gift that has been nurtured by the community life and spirituality of the Congregation.[[7]](#footnote-8) That is how we have come to know it and to share in it.

This brings us to our time and to the Le Chéile Trust and our work in education. We are not living in revolutionary France, nor through the industrial revolution in England or even in post Catholic emancipation Ireland. We are living in a secular Ireland enduring its worst economic crisis since the founding of the State, an Ireland in which the Church as an institution has been deeply wounded by the scandal of clerical child abuse, and an Ireland that is more ethnically and religiously diverse than it has ever been. On a broader scale we are living an era when ecology is becoming the issue of our time, when the economies of Asia are becoming the dominant players in world markets and when religious belief is under pressure from an aggressive secularism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other. This is the context in which we talk about *charism* and Catholic education. In the creation of the Le Chéile Trust the thirteen Congregations recognise that their *charism* is not only theirs – it is a gift of God to the Church and to the world and in the spirit of their founders they wish to continue sharing that gift as they have exercised it in and through the ministry of education. In the Le Chéile Charter the core values derived from the gospel and expressed in the *charisms* of each order are stated for our time and what that might mean to us is stated very clearly in that Charter: *“A key challenge for the future is to develop a vision of how the charism of baptism and the charism associated with the founding congregations can be integrated in a future that will be based predominantly on a lay spirituality.”*

Why is that a key challenge? Principally it is asking us to recognise that the same Spirit that moved the founders to do what they did in their time is moving us to respond in our time and in our way. We are not priests, nuns and brothers but we do share the same Spirit and we are asked to trust that Pentecost is not a yesterday event.

So how are we going to face that challenge and develop that vision? Here are three suggestions each of which relate to the *charism* of the founders and the *charism* of baptism which we share.

Firstly, like our founders, we need to recognise and reaffirm very strongly our belief in the dignity of every person as a child of God. This is not a new insight - it is going on every day in our schools but we need to name it reflect on it and celebrate it.
Secondly, like our founders, we need to proclaim that in Catholic education we are engaged in a work that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge, we are engaged in “transformative education and that is essentially a spiritual process.”[[8]](#footnote-9) We care about the children not as cogs in the economic machine but as unique creations who, in fulfilling their potential, will grow in their relationship with themselves, with others and with God.
Thirdly, like our founders we need to humbly recognise that somehow or other God is at work in us individually and collectively, as principals, teachers, parents, and boards of management. We have a role to play in the Church and in the world. This may be the hardest thing of all, so we need to have the confidence and the courage to talk about it. Given the times we are living through many lay people in today’s Church, while living the values very generously and courageously, do not feel equipped nor inclined to take on a leadership role in Catholic education. This is not only because of the prevailing secular culture and a lack of formation in theology and spirituality but also because of a sense of alienation and deep disappointment resulting from the scandals that have plagued the Church. Perhaps in response to this it is useful to call to mind the words of Flannery O’Connor the great young American novelist and short story writer. She was writing in the deep south of the United States in the sixties and once commented to a friend when asked about the difficulties of being a Catholic: “Sometimes you have to be prepared to suffer as much from the Church as for it!” Indeed this is not only a phenomenon of our times but also reflects the experience of many of the founders we have talked about.

From a faith perspective the establishment of Le Chéile Trust represents a work of the Spirit in Ireland today. Therefore it is up to us to respond. We need, in the coming years through the structures of the Le Chéile Trust, to find ways to integrate the *charisms* of our Congregations with the *charism* of baptism. We need to explore together new ways of being “Church” ways to share, to plan, to evaluate, to pray and to build one another up so that our ministry in education, our *charism* can continue to be a gift to Irish society and a source of faith, hope, and love in our school communities and beyond.

1. I am indebted to Sr Una Collins chf for her help in allowing access to her research on the founding Congregations in the Le Chéile Trust. Congregational websites also offered very useful historical background on the founders named in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For a biography see “Lady of Charity, Sister of Faith: Margaret Aylward 1810-1889” Jacinta Prunty, Four Courts Press Dublin 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For an excellent biography of see “The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle” Luke Salm FSC, Christian Brothers Publications, Washington 2nd edition 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For more on Weber’s contribution to this discussion see: *Transmission of the Charism: a Major Challenge for Catholic Education* John Lydon, International Studies in Catholic Education (vol 1) 42-58, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For more on the use of this term in the New Testament see: “The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament” Vol 3 editors Holz and Schneider, Eerdmans, NY 1998 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The word used here for gifts is charismata which is derived from charis. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See “ Ag Teacht LeChéile” p.23, a document prepared as part of the consultation process in setting up the Le Chéile Schools Trust. It is available at [www.lecheiletrust.ie/publications](http://www.lecheiletrust.ie/publications) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The Le Chéile Charter, p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)