

Venerable Mary Potter
and
The Little Company of Mary



Moira Tothill



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First published in 1999
for The Little Company of Mary
by Joan Lotter Publications
PO BOX 17024, Groenkloof 0027
Pretoria, Republic of South Africa

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Foreword

The story of Mary Potter's life has been written a number of times, and we could say: Why tell it again?

Pope John Paul II expressed the Church's recognition of Mary Potter's sanctity in 1988 by declaring her 'Venerable', the initial stage of the canonisation process.

During 1997 when we were preparing for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mary Potter it was decided to produce a brief up-to-date account of her life, and the happenings which followed. That year culminated in the translation of her remains from beneath the altar of the chapel of the Mother House in Rome to St Barnabas Cathedral, Nottingham, England, where the Congregation began.

The Little Company of Mary Sisters, Associate Members, the staff in our hospitals and

day centres now appreciate the life and historical background of Mary Potter more. Since she was declared Venerable in 1988 interest in her life and charism has grown.

Moirá Tothill has known and worked with the Little Company of Mary for many years. She accepted the task of compiling this short exposition with great interest and enjoyed the necessary research. She has truly understood Mary Potter's social and historical background, and her work will undoubtedly highlight Mary's charism and spirituality which is so relevant for today.

Sr Breda Conway, LCM

Pretoria, 1999

Acknowledgment

This brief outline of the life and work of Venerable Mary Potter owes much to the excellent book by Mary Campion, *Place of Springs*.

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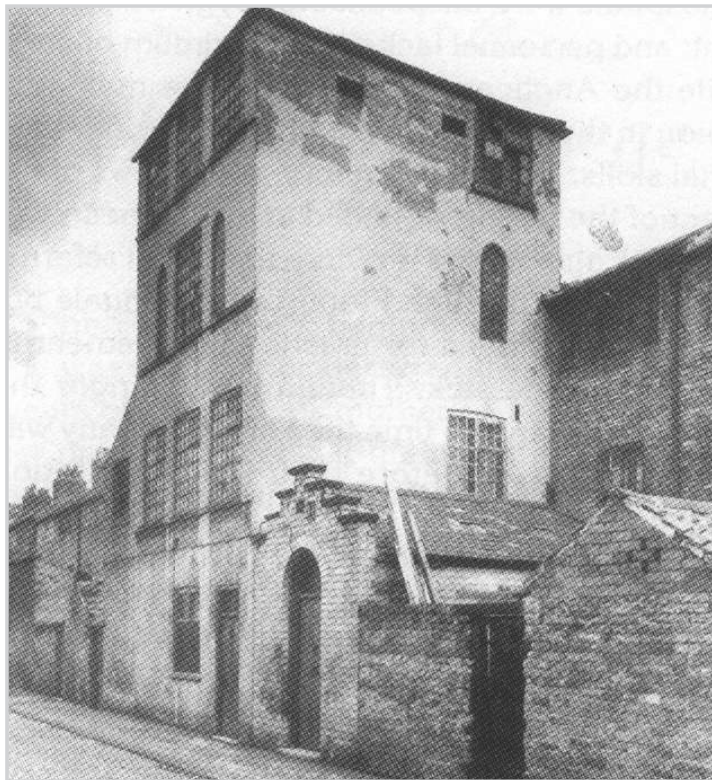
Background

On Easter Monday 1877, in a derelict stocking factory in an equally derelict district of Nottingham in England, the Little Company of Mary was born. When the building had been blessed, 29 year old Mary Potter lay down to sleep on a sack of straw on a bench, after jamming the street door with an axe to keep it closed. She had exactly two companions. Today her congregation has spread to four continents, and in 1988 the Foundress was declared Venerable by the Holy See.

The problem of suffering will always be baffling; nevertheless, were it not for the night we would not see the stars. It was in the darkness of intense physical and spiritual pain, borne with rare courage and faith, that Mary Potter came to recognise and put into

effect her life's purpose: the care of those undergoing the most crucial experience of all – death. This was to be the *raison d'être* of the Little Company she founded and guided for thirty-six years until her death on 9 April 1913.

The magnitude of Mary Potter's achievement needs to be assessed in the context of nineteenth-century England after the Industrial Revolution. One of the most telling depictions of this society of savage inequalities can be found in the novels of Charles Dickens. History books may detail the facts, but it is when we share the lives of Oliver Twist and the half-starved verminous inmates of the workhouse, encounter the nurse Sarah Gamp in her filthy garb, swilling her liquor and cheating her patients, when we frequent the frowsy dens, disease-ridden alleys and horrific slums where the poor struggled to survive, that the enormity of these social injustices is really brought home to us. While too many of the idle rich languished in boredom and inertia, many of the poor were already worn out and crippled by the age of thirty, victims of gross overwork, squalid living conditions and neglected disease.



*Hyson Green Convent,
Nottingham. Original
foundation of the Little
Company of Mary.
March 1877.*

Conditions in hospitals were unspeakable. Hygiene was virtually non-existent, and personnel lacked the minimum of nursing training. While the Anglican Sisterhoods were making a notable contribution in their dedication and compassion, they lacked professional skills. The public outcry, when news of the appalling treatment of the British wounded in the Crimean War of 1853 – 56 broke in England, led not only to radical reforms in military nursing services through Florence Nightingale but awakened the nation to the need for drastic improvement in the care of the poor and the sick. Though laws to right the worst evils would be passed by the time the Little Company was founded, it would be decades before the implementation would take effect to any noticeable degree.

This then was the England into which Mary Potter was born on 22 November 1847, and in which she would found the first Catholic Congregation of Nursing Sisters in that country. Her part in the reform of nursing standards, while unpublicised, was none the less significant. Moreover, her Sisters would bring to their apostolate a more valuable dimension: the spiritual welfare of their patients.

2

‘The Friday I was called’

The Foundress’s beginnings were hardly auspicious. Her wayward father deserted his family before Mary was two years old. Her pious mother’s misguidedness cost her daughter untold anguish. At the age of nineteen, Mary entered into an unfortunate though mercifully brief engagement with one Godfrey King of dour temperament and somewhat chill spirituality. She tried her religious vocation with the Sisters of Mercy, but ill-health had her back home after eighteen months. Always frail, she was afflicted with heart trouble, and later in her life cancer and tuberculosis would be diagnosed. Her spiritual guides for the most part not only failed to appreciate her true value and vocation, but too often willfully impeded her. In all, a recipe for disaster from a human

viewpoint, but one that underlines the power of grace and of virtue in the light of what this young woman, and in due course her Little Company, would achieve.

The picture that emerges from the descriptions of the Potter's youngest child and only daughter is an attractive one: a little girl of happy, friendly disposition, above average intelligence, musical and spirited, brought up in a strictly moral and pious household, and much loved and cosseted by her mother and four brothers, the more so because of her indifferent health. Her schooling was chequered by bouts of illness. At the age of eight, she went to a small private Catholic school as a boarder until she turned fifteen and returned home. The next seven years saw the Godfrey King episode, her brief sojourn with the Sisters of Mercy, some teaching, and visits to the impoverished sick of the Portsmouth slums. To all appearances a very ordinary existence, limited further by the social convention of the time with its minimal opportunities for well-bred women, as well as by the physical pain and weakness to which she was subject and which resulted

in long-periods of inactivity and isolation. Unseen, however, was Mary's advancement from what seems to have been unexceptional piety to deep levels of spiritual awareness and prayer, a whole-hearted dedication to Our Lady, and a powerful urge to pray in particular for the dying. Her receptive mind was also absorbing the implications of the social and economic conditions prevailing in England at the time.

And then 6 November 1874 dawned. Ever after, Mary was to speak of this day as: 'The Friday I was called.' Praying in her room, she experienced a clear directive: 'I have chosen you that you should go and bring forth fruit and that your fruit should remain.' To her response, 'Why me?' came the reply, 'The weak things of this world have I chosen.' The next day, alone at breakfast, she was reading about Our Lady's patronage of the dying. Once again came the voice within her, 'It is my will that you do this work.' In the course of the next few months she was similarly led to honour in a special way the Maternal Heart of Mary, the Precious Blood of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Truth and

Life. Thus was the plan of her life's work integrated and ignited. Her goal was now clear, but the path to its attainment would be anything but easy.

3

Opposition and support

Mary's first move was to write to her spiritual director, Monsignor Virtue, Military Chaplain of the Portsmouth Garrison, and inform him of the events of the preceding months and her consequent desire to form a new Religious Institute. For months she waited patiently for a response. It came. Her proposal was condemned outright: she was to put the entire plan out of her mind. If Mary had hoped for support from her family, this was far from forthcoming. On the contrary, they opposed her resolutely. That someone of her frailty and lack of experience in the ways of the world, with neither financial resources nor influence, should attempt such a project seemed to her mother and brothers utter folly. Her anguish of soul aggravating her physical handicaps, her home now a place of discord and estrangement, her purest intentions

mistrusted and censured by ecclesiastical authorities, it is not surprising that towards the end of the end of 1876 Mary felt as though she were ‘in a corner of hell’ as did Anna Maria Taigi of whose sufferings she had read. In the meantime she had written her *Path of Mary*, a commentary on St Grignon de Monfort’s *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*.

The trauma of these years in no way diminished her resolve. Fortified by prayer and her unflinching desire to do God’s will and to trust Him to point the way, she held her ground. A brief respite came when a Marist Priest, Father Selley, gave her his sympathetic guidance and, of his own accord, without either Mary’s presence or assistance, began to direct a small group of women on the lines she had earlier indicated. This support was soon withdrawn when Father Selley’s superiors ordered him to abandon the little association; however, he never lost interest in Mary and her young Congregation.

Matters seemed at their bleakest when in December 1876 Mary learned that the Bishop of Nottingham might be willing to co-operate. A visit to Nottingham was now imperative. The convention of the time required that Mary have her mother's approval before she could be away from home. Here another setback occurred, for Mrs Potter refused altogether to give this permission. And now Mary realised that she had no option but to take matters into her own hands. Instead of returning home with her sister-in-law after a visit to Brighton, she resolved to go to London to her brother Henry, who had by this time come to share her way of thinking. Marguerite would have to tell Mrs Potter. The following day Henry bought his sister a ticket and put her on the train to Nottingham. (His final gesture of support was to have interesting repercussions, for his daughter Hilda would in years to come be the third Superior General of the Little Company of Mary.) It was 13 January 1877. The turning point in Mary Potter's life had been reached.



*The old pear tree in the
garden of Hyson Green
Convent.*

4

Easter opening

Dr Edward Bagshawe, Bishop of the problematic and hitherto neglected diocese of Nottingham of which he had been appointed in 1874, at first received Mary coldly. Alone in a strange town, financially strained and physically stressed by the winter cold, she could yet say that his initial rebuff ‘had no effect on me, thank God’. It was not long before the Bishop was won over by her openness and serenity and the genuineness of her spiritual aims. Within ten days of their first meeting, with the help of an Irish resident, Mrs Tacey, she had located Hyson Green, which was to be the first Mother House of the Little Company of Mary. The building had been a stocking factory.



Drawing of the pear tree by Marie Angel, great-niece of Venerable Mary Potter.

Dilapidated, strewn with bricks, broken crockery and other rubbish, the building consisted of three floors connected merely by ladders. Mary at once set about cleaning the place and organising workmen for essential repairs. She commented, 'A wonderful strength came to me. I who had been so delicate and supposed to eat meat two or three times a day, made my dinner on bread and pork dripping.'

However, the Bishop was alarmed at the hazardous state of the building, and ordered her to vacate it until it was ready for habitation. Once again, it was kind Mrs Tacey who stepped in to offer Mary and her two companions hospitality. On 15 March the Bishop appointed Mary Superior of the new Congregation with 'full authority'. On St Joseph's Feast, 19 March, the contract for the building was signed, and the Bishop would pay the year's rent of £33.12s.

On Palm Sunday, 25 March, Mary was joined by her first two companions, Mrs Bryan and Miss Agnes Bray. The three women had one week in which to devise and carry out

a plan for a chapel, since Bishop Bagshawe was to bless and officially open the Convent on Easter Monday. A room on the second floor was selected, the ceiling painted lemon-cream and the walls brown and grey divided by a band with an inscription in large gold letters, part of which read:

Anima Mariae, ut Magnificat Dominum

Sit in singulis; Spiritus Mariae, ut

Exultet in Deo.

(Let the soul of Mary be in each of us that it may magnify the Lord. Let the spirit of Mary [be in us] that it may rejoice in God.)

Furnishings, a statue of Our Lady, vestments, altar vessels, benches and an organ were variously donated or loaned. After the Convent, mission and school had been dedicated to the Maternal Heart of Mary, Pontifical Mass was celebrated in the presence of a

large congregation. To ensure the safety of the Blessed Sacrament, Mary and her tiny community elected to sleep on straw on the benches in the chapel. These would be their beds for several years. Without delay the Sisters saw to it that a pot of soup was kept on the boil all day to feed the hungry who were already begging at their door. They themselves subsisted on very little, and had at times to resort to begging in order to supply their needs and those of the destitute.

On 2 July, Feast of the Visitation, the religious habit was given to Mary and Sister Magdalen Bryan, Sister Agnes Bray, Sister Cecilia Smith and Sister Phillip Coleridge. The people of the district, where they were already popular, delighting in glimpsing 'the new Sisters in the blue veils'.



*Mother Mary Potter, Mother M. Cecelia Smith, Mother M. Phillip Coleridge,
Bishop Edward Bagshawe.*

5

Major setbacks

Bishop Bagshawe's support had been a major factor in the launching of the Little Company of Mary. Unfortunately it soon became apparent that his interest was developing into something more. Domineering in character, he now took it upon himself to write the Rule of Congregation and began to assume control of the whole way of the Sisters, involving them in an unwise spread of good works – a school, a first-aid centre, catechesis, marriage preparation, visits to the sick and the poor, home-nursing. As a result, not only were they exhausted, but little or no time was left for prayer and spiritual training.

All this activity ran counter to the intentions of the Foundress who held it vital that

her Sister's apostolate be based on a firm spiritual foundation. Further, she wished them to be professionals as nurses – an ideal that was far from the accepted one at the time, given the abysmal levels of nursing that prevailed. It was no secret that in the public hospitals the death rate was higher than anywhere else, and the poor dreaded being sent there. Home-nursing, appalling as it was then, was felt to be preferable, but few were able to afford it. So it was to the hovels and the alleys that the Sisters went to care for the sick and dying. Mary Potter had lost no time in appointing the only trained nurse of the pioneer group, Sister Phillip (Edith Coleridge) to teach the Sisters. This Sister, who would eventually succeed the Foundress as Superior General, had qualified at St George's Hospital in London, which had already adopted a reformed system of nursing. Thus, though lacking many of the facilities that are taken for granted in hospitals today, the quality of the Sisters' nursing was far in advance of the service generally given. It was little wonder that they were in great demand.

Inevitably, as the energies of the Sisters, both those already received and the novices,

were strained beyond limit by the Bishop's regimen and misguided zeal, the nascent Congregation began to fall apart. Moreover, less than three weeks after the reception of the Sisters on 2 July, Bishop Bagshawe had taken the extraordinary step of deposing Mother Mary Potter as Superior and appointing in her place Mother Magdalen (Mrs Bryan) without consulting either of them. For six months Mary was left among the rank and file. She was then made mistress of Novices but this was in fact in name only, for the Bishop prescribed her duties which amounted almost solely to giving the novices a single formal lecture per week. However, she was permitted to put some of her ideas in writing, and in *Mary's Conferences*, published in 1882, she summarised the mission of the Little Company of Mary in the Church.

It was during this period of trial that Mary twice underwent surgery for breast cancer. The operations were carried out in the Convent in June and December of 1878, with few of the amenities of today. Moreover, the patient's heart condition precluded the use of a full anaesthetic, and she remained semi-conscious throughout. One positive effect of this

illness was that it was the means of reconciling Mrs Potter with her daughter.

As if she had not had enough to bear, the Bishop now made two moves typical of his often arbitrary and insensitive exercise of authority. The first was to direct Mary to beg for alms when travelling in August on a visit to her home at Southsea. Secondly, on 15 September he appointed a novice, Sister Francis, who had been received only that day, Assistant Superior instead of Mother Mary Potter whom this Sister disliked intensely. With the resulting tension, the continued existence of the community was in greater jeopardy than ever. Mary, whose obedience throughout the eighteen months had never faltered, now urged the Bishop to allow a proper election. Realising that matters had reached a critical pitch, he consented. On 14 February the Sisters cast their votes, predictably in favour of the Foundress. She was thereupon reinstated as Superior, at the age of 31, and would hold office as Mother General of the Little Company of Mary until her death in 1913.

Spiritually and financially gravely threatened by the events of this period, the Little Company had now to be rescued by Mother Mary Potter. She embarked at once on major reform, her main thrust being to restore normal community discipline and to revive a deep spirit of prayer. Her efforts bore fruit, yet the Bishop continued to interfere, not only in sending inexperienced novices and postulants to deserted missions where they lacked spiritual help, but in determining the very minutiae of the Sisters' lives. The Foundress saw clearly that this state of affairs must end. She spoke her mind to him courteously but firmly, and asked him several times to allow her to go to Rome to obtain papal approval of the Rule. At last he relented and gave his consent, explaining later that in doing so he had desired only to meet 'the last wish of a dying woman'.



His Holiness Pope Leo XIII.

6

Rome

Five years had passed since the opening of the Hyson Green Convent of the Maternal Heart, and Mary and two companions, Sister Phillip (Edith Coleridge) and Sister Cecelia (Eleanor Smith) were on their way to Rome and the Holy Father. The journey took five weeks, and had to be broken several times to enable the Foundress to recover as best she could from illness which became increasingly alarming. The little party arrived on 9 October, 1882, and in less than a fortnight the three Sisters were rewarded with attendance at the Papal Mass followed by a private audience with Pope Leo XIII. Already fully informed on the origin and development of the young Congregation, the Pope heard Mary's plea for his blessing on the Little Company of Mary and his approval of its Rule. She added that could this be granted she would

return to England happy. Leo XIII's response was, 'Why go back? Why not remain? The doors of Rome are open to you.' Her Congregation thus blessed and in addition invited to open a house in Rome, Mary Potter decided there and then to stay.

Approval of the rule was not granted as speedily. The fact was that Bishop Bagshawe's draft needed considerable revision, differing radically from the Foundress's view of the spirit and work of her Congregation. For Mother Potter, intensive spiritual training of the novices, and the seriousness of the role of the Novice Mistress were primary. Only thus could her Sisters be prepared for the life of prayer and union with Christ in the Heart of Mary that would be the mainspring of their active apostolate of nursing and, very specially, the care of the dying. Furthermore, she wished the government and administration of the Congregation to be central, under a Superior General elected by the Sisters and responsible under God to the Holy See.

Four years of controversy and uncertainty ensued. Finally Mary's gentle prayerful persistence won the day. Gradually the Rule was shaped to fit her vision, and at the end of May 1886 Pope Leo XIII signed the Decree approving the Little Company of Mary for a period of five years. Final approbation would be received seven years later and the Mother House transferred officially to Rome, but for the time being the main hurdles had been surmounted and the Foundress could now proceed with the full implementation of her aims.

To Bishop Bagshawe's credit it must be noted that on being informed by the Holy See that he was no longer Superior of the Little Company, he wrote a letter of congratulation to Mother Potter, concluding, 'I pray God to bless you all, and wish you all prosperity and success to your work and Institute.' Moreover, he visited her whenever he was in Rome, and his relationship with her and her Little Company was one of cordiality and affection until his death in 1915 in the Sisters' house at Isleworth in West London. The Little Company would always be grateful to him for having opened the way to its foundation.



*Mother Mary Potter and
Mother Phillip Coleridge.*

7

Expansion

Though the Holy Father had invited the Little Company to set up a house in Rome, this was not formally effected until after nineteen months of vicissitudes. The Sisters had at once begun their ministry by nursing the sick in their homes, but accommodation and finance presented a series of problems.

In June 1883, Mother Mary Potter suffered a serious heart attack and was given the Last Rites by Father Luke Carey of the Irish Franciscan College, who had already befriended the little group and found them a small apartment on the Via Purificazione near his church. The trauma of this latest duel with death, and one in which all odds seemed to be against her survival, convinced Mary all the more of the supreme importance of the



Chapel of the Maternal Heart of Mary, Mother House, Via San Stefano Rotondo, Rome, opened in 1908, resting-place of Venerable Mary Potter 1919 – 1997.



Calvary Hospital, Mother House, Rome, founded 1907.

Little Company's apostolate of prayer and care for the dying. She rallied once again, and on 20 May 1884, having moved to a larger house on the Via Sforza, could rejoice with her Sisters in the formal establishment of the Little Company in Rome by decree of the Cardinal Vicar.

The Congregation now totalled 40 members. But all was not well in England, for Bishop Bagshawe was still a disturbing factor. Eventually in August 1886 Mary was free to leave Rome to attend to the problems that were troubling the Hyson Green community. On 15 September she and four of the pioneer Sisters made their Final Profession in the chapel there. During a stay of three months Mary, by dint of tenacity of purpose coupled with gentleness, set about closing the various missions and restoring Hyson Green as a house of prayer, religious observance, community unity and financial security. In 1888 – 89 the Foundress paid a second and final visit to the country of her birth and the birth of her Little Company.



Members of the first General Council, elected at the General Chapter, 1914.
Back row: Mother M. Cecilia Smith, Mother M. Catherine Crosker, Mother M. Phillip Coleridge,
Mother M. Agnes Bray, Sister M. Raphael Farrer.
Front: Mother M. Hilda Potter, niece of the foundress.

In the meantime, in 1885 a foundation had been made in Australia at the request of the new Archbishop of Sydney. Deeply aware of the responsibility of branching out at such a distance, Mother Mary appointed Mother Raphael to lead the pioneer group. As she later wrote, this sister, as yet only in her twenties, was ‘refined and Mary-like, with a high religious feeling which the Australian Sisters have certainly inherited.’

Three years later, Ireland received its first Little Company community when St John’s was opened in Limerick on 10 October 1888. It is of interest that there had been a steady influx of postulants from Ireland over the years, and in 1888 Irish Sisters formed more than half of the entire Congregation.

When Final Approbation of the Rule was given by the Holy See in April 1893, the Little Company of Mary numbered six houses: two in Italy, and one each in England, Australia, Ireland and the United States. Twenty years later, when the Foundress dies, these had increased to sixteen: four in England, three in Italy, three in Australia, three in Ireland,

and one each in the United States, Malta and South Africa. The latter had been founded in Port Elizabeth in 1904 from the Australian Province, at the request of Dr MacSherry, Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern Cape Colony. After 21 years the South African Province was taken over by the Irish Province of the Little Company. Within less than a year of Mother Mary's death, in January 1914, the Congregation would spread further to New Zealand.

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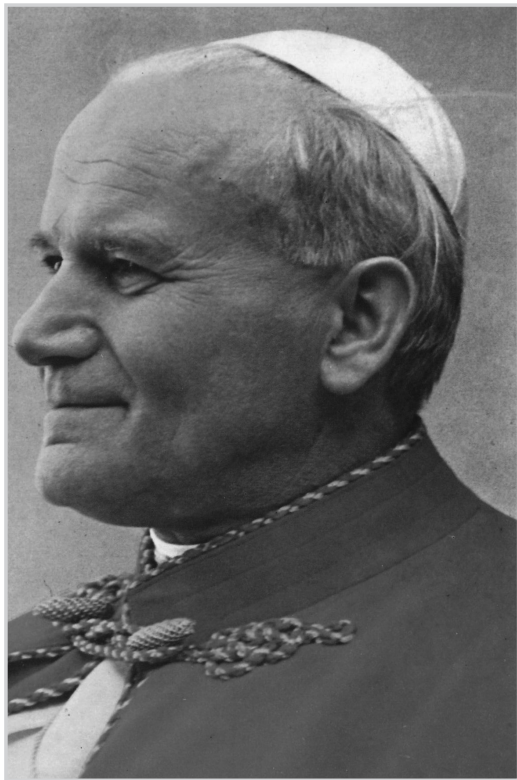
The last years

Mother Mary Potter's last years were marked by increasing illness. Heart disease and a large tumour of the shoulder joint were diagnosed in 1890, tuberculosis in 1907, an hereditary lesion of the heart and chronic bronchial alveolitis in 1909, and by 1912 her eyesight was failing. She had moved to Calvary Hospital, the Mother House in Rome, in 1906, but was confined to her cell and her sitting-room where she made herself available to all who wished to see her. They came in their numbers – the Queen of Italy, Cardinals, clergy, religious, rich and poor – and to each she gave her undivided attention and loving welcome.

On 4 April 1913 it was once again Franciscan Father Luke Carey who gave her the last

Sacraments as he had done twenty years previously when it had seemed she could not last the night. On 9 April, at the age of 65, Mother Mary Potter went gently to God. She was laid to rest on 12 April in the Campo Santo outside the walls of Rome. Four years later, on 5 May 1917, her remains were moved to the crypt beneath the chapel of Calvary Hospital, the Mother House on the Colelian Hill. Finally, on 3 December 1997, Mary Potter's remains were transferred to St Barnabas Cathedral in Nottingham, birthplace of her Little Company.

In 1988, Pope John Paul II declared Mother Mary Potter 'Venerable', the first step to canonisation. What she had accomplished was in itself formidable but when viewed in the light of the physical frailty and pain she endured all her life, not to mention the psychological and spiritual suffering that beset her struggle to actualise her vision of her vocation, her life's work is inexplicable other than in terms of exceptional holiness: an unswerving dedication of herself to the Will of God as made clear to her in the darkness of her pain, and a self-emptying that made it possible for Him to achieve that Will through her.



His Holiness Pope John Paul II.

The story of Mary Potter's life has been written a number of times.

However, in 1988 Pope John Paul II expressed the Church's recognition of Mary Potter's sanctity by declaring her 'Venerable', the initial stage of the canonisation process. Since this event interest in her life has grown.

During 1997 when the 150th celebration of Mary Potter's birth took place, it was decided to produce a brief up-to-date account of her life and the happenings that followed. That year culminated in the translation of her remains from Rome to Nottingham.



*Present resting place of Venerable Mary Potter,
St Barnabas Cathedral, Nottingham*