



Like a Tree by Running Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California's First Sister of Mercy

Mary Katherine Doyle RSM

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Like a Tree by Running Water Mary Katherine Doyle, RSM The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California's First Sister of Mercy She did it all! These words summarize the story of Katherine Russell better known to Californians as Mother Mary Baptist Russell, pioneer founder of the Sisters of Mercy in California. The story of this remarkable woman is one that speaks of courage in the face of opposition and hardship, of dedication to those society has forgotten, of ingenuity and creativity in responding to the crises and needs of post Gold Rush California. Born in pre-famine Ireland, Mary Baptist learned about hardship and poverty through the experience of the Irish people. Moved by an urgent longing to be of service to the poor and by a desire to dedicate her life to God, she entered the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale, Co. Cork, Ireland in 1848. Just six years later she set out with seven of her sisters on a journey which would make her one of the "pioneer makers of Northern California." Her story, even 150 years later, is one that stirs in the reader a sense of wonder and amazement at the breadth of her accomplishments. Arriving in San Francisco in 1854, Mary Baptist started the first Catholic Hospital in California, negotiated with the State to care for its young women delinquents, its indigent sick and its aged. No challenge was too much for her or for her sisters. They quickly responded to the health care needs of the city during the cholera epidemic of 1855 and again in the small pox epidemic of 1868. She built a House of Mercy to shelter domestic servants and protect them from exploitation, ministered to women caught in the web of prostitution and addiction, set up elementary schools and academies. Mary Baptist was the first women to be given permission to visit prisoners in San Quentin. Her work did not end there. She established a registry office to find jobs for willing workers, provided food for the unemployed during California's severe depressions, and found time to set up natural history museums and educational displays. Mary Baptist did not confine her work to San Francisco. She established a convent and school in Sacramento in 1857 where her sisters quickly became an integral part of the city. They were its first visiting nurses and opened St. Joseph Academy where generations of women were educated for leadership and service. During the great flood of 1861, with the city under water for almost six months, the sisters ministered by boat to those in need. In 1863 Mary Baptist extended her works to Grass Valley, concentrating on education and care for orphans. In the midst of all this activity, Mary Baptist found time to write lengthy letters to friends, family and governmental agencies. These letters have been collected in this work and join with her story in presenting a woman worth remembering, one who was called by her contemporaries the "best known charitable worker on the Pacific Coast." Endorsements "Sister M. Katherine Doyle provides a much-needed biography of one of the giants of pioneer San Francisco and California, Mother Mary Baptist Russell. She ably documents the contributions of Mary Baptist and the Sisters of Mercy to the establishment of the basic institutions of what we now call the social safety net--health care, education, care for the elderly, the poor, the outcast, and more. This wonderful study brings the breadth of Mary Baptist's vision to life, a vision which 'included the healing of the whole fabric of society.'" Jeff Burns, Archivist for the Archdiocese of San Francisco

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